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A Multisystem View at Teacher Training Colleges during the COVID-19 Pandemic

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Abstract

The purpose of the current study was to examine the challenges of distance learning (DL) teacher education (TE) experienced by decision makers, lecturers, and pedagogical instructors at PE teacher training colleges during the COVID-19 pandemic, and explore how these challenges were dealt with. In-depth interviews were conducted with 24 participants from five colleges of education in Israel where physical education teacher training is taught. A trifold process characterizes the investigated institutions: Frustration and a sense of helplessness, high self-satisfaction regarding the online instruction, and frustration combined with hope that the era of distance teaching will soon end. Most decisions regarding the changes and transitions were made by the teaching staff. Our findings can help those involved in teacher education in understanding how organizational and pedagogical decisions were made under conditions of uncertainty and crisis, and how these training programs were adapted to the new circumstances. Our findings may also serve as a basis for future discussion on long-distance teacher education.

Keywords: Decision making during crisis, distance learning, teaching experience, educational leadership

Introduction

Over the past two decades, the phenomenon of globalization in general, and in education in particular, has been expanding, especially in light of distance learning (DL) opportunities. Studies have examined the pros and cons of DL (Dumford & Miller, 2018; Rodrigues et al., 2019) and education systems worldwide have been heavily geared towards adopting widescale distance-teaching technologies (Rumble, 2019). In Israel, the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic in March 2020 led to emergency regulations and decisions using the top-down approach, whereby the Ministry of Health, the Council for Higher Education, and the Ministry of Education announced an immediate transition to DL. All educational institutions, from kindergartens, through high schools, to colleges and universities closed their doors to face-to-face encounters. In April 2020, estimates showed that the closure of schools in 138 countries had negatively impacted the education of about 80% of the world's children (UNESCO, 2020; Van Lancker & Parolin, 2020).

As the academic colleges for training physical education (PE) teachers were also required to follow these DL guidelines, a completely new system for training teaching emerged. The change for PE student teachers was twofold, as they had to study both theoretical classes and practical PE ones, such as basketball, dancing, football, gymnastics, and swimming, and they also have to conduct their

field experience in schools while subjected to new and unfamiliar situations of DL.

Recent studies on teacher preparation institutions worldwide (e.g., Ellis et al., 2020; Lawson, 2021;) describe new challenges for both teachers and students due to DL, including lack of knowledge and skills for implementing various DL platforms for learning/teaching, students' lack of interest who have to listen to lectures via their smart devices, abandoning lessons, poor communication between students and lecturers, and difficulty in assessing what has been learned – as well as organizational issues such as maintaining contact within the institution and lack of flexibility on the part of the management and administration levels.

PE Teacher Training and DL

Maintaining the quality of PE students' long-distance training poses a pedagogical and administrative challenge for both lecturers and students (Lu et al., 2020). For example, anatomy and physiology courses require students to participate in laboratory classes, where they conduct experimental projects or learn to measure/evaluate motor performance using unique measuring instruments. The presence of the lecturers in the laboratories is also essential, as they facilitate the learning process. This challenge becomes even more enhanced for the PE student teachers, who are unable to practice their teaching in the field but must do so via DL practical PE courses. For example, how can they teach motor skills such as throwing a basketball, jumping long distance jumping, or swimming when classes are conducted from afar?

As such, the question that arises asks whether it is possible to teach athletic skills from afar, without the physical presence and proximity of the trainee teachers and their school students? Can they guide them on motor learning principles, demonstrate correct patterns of movements, or to provide them with the necessary feedback for correcting their performance? In addition, when teaching PE via DL, student teachers are not in the proximity of their supervising teachers or their pedagogical instructors. Some trainee PE teachers who began their practical teaching experience in the field prior to the pandemic, may having greater ability to conduct DL for their PE classes. Yet many others started their practical teaching after schools closed down, having no experience in teaching face-to-face in the field in routine times. For these students, it is unclear how well their practical experience during the crisis period will prepare them for teaching in the future.

Lecturers have demonstrated creativity during the pandemic, finding suitable and alternative methods for enabling student teachers to continue to learn effectively (George, 2020; Rapanta et al., 2020). However, as social distancing continues to be enforced, changes that were quickly and successfully implemented in the short term may not necessarily provide adequate solutions to challenges in the medium term. Moreover, in the long term, to turn the crisis into a real opportunity for change and adaptation, new systems are required for complex planning and for encouraging willingness to change (Janssen & van der Voort, 2020).

Two theories served as the framework for the current study. The Theory of Self-Efficacy (Bandura, 1997), and the Theory of Socialization (Lawson, 1983). According to the Theory of Self-Efficacy (1997), people's perceptions of their ability are highly and positively related to their actual ability. Moreover, their perceptions are mainly based on sources of information that focus on past experiences and performance achievements, and on observational experiences, i.e., observing similar behaviors in others. With DL, these sources of information are lacking, since PE student teachers do not experience teaching in the field or observing their peers when they are teaching. According to the Theory of Socialization, a central theory relating to the qualitative professional preparation of PE teachers (Lawson, 1983), it is important that student teachers do not experience feelings of physical or intellectual isolation from their colleagues or the school's teaching community. Yet the Covid-19 pandemic poses a serious challenge, as PE trainee teachers are unable to experience actual teaching in schools and are denied the chance to interact with their peers, supervising teachers, and pedagogical instructors, and with rest of the teaching community in the school (e.g., Centeio et al., 2021). Hence, the challenges of teacher preparation were exceptional and crossed all levels of decision makers from the top – college presidents, down to the lecturers.

Social-emotional aspects of PE teacher preparation has gained great interest, mainly in light of social distancing and enforced isolation during the pandemic. In their study on teaching PE during Covid-19, Varea and González-Calvo (2020) found that PE student teachers experiences feelings of sadness, anger, frustration, and even helplessness: not only had all physical contact with their school students been taken away from them, but so had the constant communication with learners, the joy of participating in joint activities, the equipment and facilities, and even a space in which to be physically active. The vitality stemming from teaching PE was truly impaired.

Historian MacMillan (2020), who reviewed the impact of conflictual crises and wars from the 18th century to the COVID-19 pandemic, claims that these events ultimately led actually humanity to increased welfare, construction, prosperity, and reorganization. As such, it is imperative to learn from today's events, as a means for reorganizing paths of change and understanding processes, being prepared for the next unexpected event, and generating effective changes for the future. A comprehensive examination of multiple systems within and across higher

education institutions has not been previously undertaken, particularly in the context of teacher education institutions. Given the critical importance of learning from the past experiences for growth and enhancement, the present study seeks to contribute to our understanding of the distinctive challenges faced by physical education teacher education programs amidst the COVID-19 pandemic.

In light of this literature review, the current study aimed to examine the challenges of DL teacher education (TE) experienced by decision makers, lecturers, and pedagogical instructors at PE teacher training colleges during the COVID-19 pandemic, and explore how these challenges were dealt with.

Method

Participants

The study included interviews with 24 position holders from the only five academic colleges of education in Israel that offer PE teacher training programs. The interviewees were from four different decision-making levels: (a) five college presidents [two females, three males, mean age-64 years, mean years in current position- 9]; (b) five PE program directors, one from each institution [three males, 2 females, mean age-55; mean years of college teaching experience-26) (c) four pedagogical instructors from the elementary education track and four pedagogical instructors from the middle-school and high-school track [four males and four females, mean age-46, mean years of experience-15]; and (d) six sports and movement teachers [four females and two males, mean age-52, mean years of experience-19].

PE Teacher Education in Israel

Other than the five academic colleges of education that participated in this study, no other academic institutions offer PE teacher education programs in Israel. These integrative programs combine PE discipline studies with teaching and education studies, and graduate students are awarded a bachelor's degree (BEd) in PE teaching, with a teaching certificate in PE for kindergarten to high school. Students cannot study an additional teaching field during their four years of PE teacher training. The PE teaching curricula at these colleges are comprised of four clusters of subjects: (a) general studies and introductory courses; (b) studies in the chosen PE discipline; (c) individual and team motor skills; and (d) teaching and education studies.

Interviews

Individual semi-structured in-depth interviews were conducted with each participant, including the following questions: Can you specify the difficulties you face now, compared to routine pre-Covid-19 times? Who have you consulted with? What benefits do you find in pedagogical tutoring through DL? When reverting to routine times, what would you like to take from this experience and what would you like to forget? Are there aspects that are completely impossible to deal with remotely? College presidents were also asked whether they have a collaborative consulting network between themselves and their peers in other colleges, and for which topics.

After receiving approval from the College Ethics Committee as well as written informed consent by email and a recorded dialog of agreement from all participants, the interviews were conducted and transcribed. The interviews were conducted via Zoom, and lasted 30–60 minutes. At the beginning of the interview, the interviewees were informed that these conversations are part of a study and would be recorded and transcribed verbatim, but that their anonymity would be maintained at every stage.

Data Analysis

To analyze the data, the Direct Content Analysis Approach was used (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005), whereby the researchers present a set of presuppositions based on previous theories and/or research findings, in an attempt to expand on the existing knowledge and present new and additional input. This data processing technique is the same as the Conventional Content Analysis Approach, where the researchers first reach key thoughts and concepts, and then encode them with titles, sorting the clusters of arisen topics into content categories. For instance, while we were aware of the existence of challenges, their specific nature and magnitude remained unclear. Therefore, the initial stage of analysis involved elucidating the challenges encountered by the participants. Subsequently, the second phase aimed to consolidate various themes into overarching categories that shared a common underlying theme. This approach enabled us to distill the extensive array of examples into three-four primary themes for each group of participants, as outlined in Table 1 and Figures 1, 2, and 3.

Results

The first aim of this study was to examine the challenges faced by college presidents, directors of PE teacher education programs, pedagogical instructors, and Sports Class Instructors. Our findings are presented according to the emerging themes from each of the four groups of interviewees, including quotations as examples.

College Presidents

Eight main themes emerged regarding the challenges college' presidents faced: (1) lack of clear guidance

from the Ministry of Education (MOE); (2) college resilience; (3) civil behavior characteristics; (4) delegating authority to the managerial team; (5) maintaining the academic routine; (6) faculty difficulties; (7) students' difficulties, and (8) inter-intra organizational communications (Figure 1).

The first challenge included *Lack of clear guidance from the MOE*, seen in input such as, "No instructions were given regarding lecturers who are part of the at-risk group of people [in light of the Coronavirus]." The second theme relates to *College resilience*, referring to the technological infrastructure that was provided to ease the transition to DL, ensuring a fast and immediate process. Interviewees used several terms to describe this, such as, "creativity", "thinking out of the box", "mutual trust", "accountability", and "rapid mobilization of faculty members to deal with unfamiliar situations". Third, *Civil behavior characteristics* were mentioned by all five college presidents, such as, "They all lined up to deal with the present needs: academic staff members, administrative staff members, and students…" as well as, "I witnessed commitment, cooperative work, assistance (peers, academic faculty members helping students, and students helping each other), the joy of creating, and a willingness to help." Fourth, the theme *Delegating authority to the managerial team* also emerged. Some presidents were involved in the daily decision-making of their managerial team. Yet others delegated the decision-making to others, relying on them fully and claiming that this was their routine leadership behavior. They explained that they had not altered their managerial behavior during the crisis as a means for maintaining the organizational culture and offering a relaxed atmosphere wherever possible. For example, "I haven't changed any of my former managerial habits, and I don't think that I've learned something new about myself as a leader that I was not aware of earlier." The fifth theme expresses the college presidents' difficulty in *maintaining the academic routine*, as seen in the statement: "The learning-teaching routine should continue as much as possible, so that the academic year is not harmed."

The sixth theme, *Faculty difficulties*, encompassed two aspects, i.e., both the faculty's distress stemming from the fast transition to using unfamiliar technology as a means for DL and the faculty's feelings of having an overwhelming workload. Two presidents addressed this saying, "I had to be very attentive to several faculty members," and "I dealt with the stress that was expressed by several faculty members". The seventh theme, *Student difficulties*, relates to recognizing that heterogeneity exists among the students' input regarding their ability to learn in an online environment, as well as receiving complaints from students about their having to study online for many hours and their heavy load of assignments.

Finally, the last theme relates to *Inter-intra organizational communications*. No unity was seen regarding inter-organizational communications. The presidents all reported that they rarely-to- never consulted their colleagues at other colleges, yet did consult with officials from the MOE when needed. Two of these interviewees said that they had arranged "regular Zoom meetings with the faculty", and some had even added meetings with faculty members to strengthen bonding. For example, "I added daily Zoom meetings to resolve issues." Others maintained a routine of "conducting a board meeting once every two weeks," as well as "regularly sending messages to the faculty," and "maintaining ongoing contact between myself and the department heads."

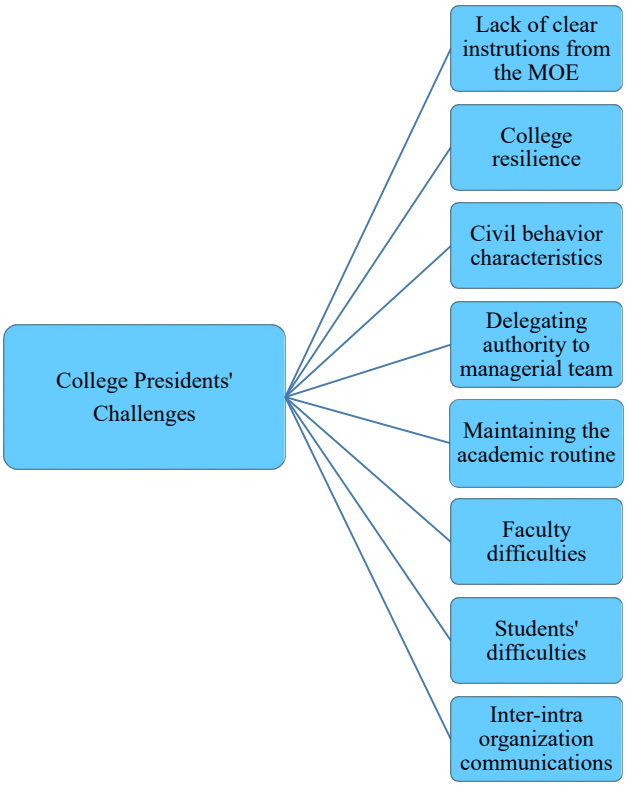


Figure 1. Themes from interviews with college presidents

Directors of PE Teacher Education Programs

Four main themes arose when analyzing the data from the program directors' interviews: (1) operating under conditions of uncertainty; (2) technological aspects and teacher readiness; (3) academic freedom; and (4) students' inquiries, complaints, and requests (Figure 2).

Regarding *Operating under conditions of uncertainty*, the main concern was not knowing in advance how long the DL would continue – information that is crucial to the planning of the semester. Uncertainty was depicted also with regard to the lecturers' adaptation to the use of DL and related digital technologies. In addition, as such a rapid transition from traditional teaching methods to

teaching solely through DL had never been experienced before, a range of questions arose, relating to levels of responsiveness among the faculty and the students, for example. This was clearly seen in these interviewees' responses, such as, "Keeping the semester alive – with that in mind, several plans were made, but over the first few weeks, I couldn't and didn't want to introduce any additional changes. In doing so, I thought I was lending stability to the system." Another example can be seen in the following remark: "I felt uncertainty from all levels of the organization, bottom-up as well as top-down. People just acted like they were obeying orders. Leadership wasn't demonstrated anywhere."

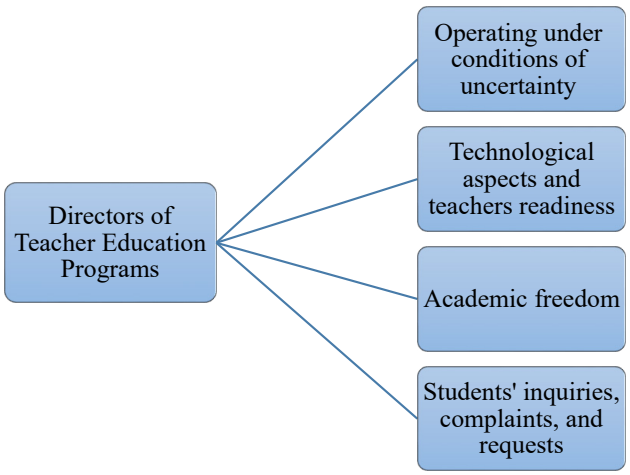


Figure 2. Main themes from interviews with PE program directors

In relation to the theme of *Technological aspects and teacher readiness*, directors made statements such as, "I knew that most faculty members, including myself, would have a hard time transitioning to distance learning. In the past, there were many objections to online teaching. This time I knew it was not a training session, and everyone must respond quickly and answer whether they can comply with the new system," or "I didn't know how successful the lecturers would be in transitioning to teaching via the Zoom application."

The third theme relates to *Academic freedom*, with a variety of attitudes being expressed. While some directors expressed their support and trust in allowing lecturers to manage their DL classes with full autonomy, others expressed authoritativeness, consciously limiting the faculty's academic freedom. For example, "I realized that there were differences between lecturers concerning the degree of technological knowledge, and I wasn't sure if… or how to intervene in order to help." Another director explained, "I trusted my faculty and decided to act in line with a value that I've always believed in… academic freedom." The following statement also belongs to this theme: "The value of academic freedom could not be applied here. Otherwise, everyone would act as they please and chaos would take over."

The fourth and final theme for this group of interviewees relates to *Students' inquiries, complaints, and requests*. Over the first few weeks of the DL, the majority of students' inquiries focused on their workload, imposed by many faculty members. In addition, some students complained about having to listen to a prerecorded lecture on the course website, without being able to interact or communicate with the lecturers. In addition, the directors found changes to class schedules, with the lecturers simply changing the time of their lectures, and without consistent or clear teacher-student communications. In addition, one director explained that "Sitting passively for hours is impossible; teachers are expected to enhance their technological skills and help the students become more involved in the learning process".

Pedagogical Instructors and Sports Class Instructors

Figure 3 demonstrates the three main themes that emerged from the interviews with the pedagogical instructors and the sport classes instructors: (1) personal aspects; (2) professional level: Teaching-learning aspects: and (3) the essence of relationships with others.

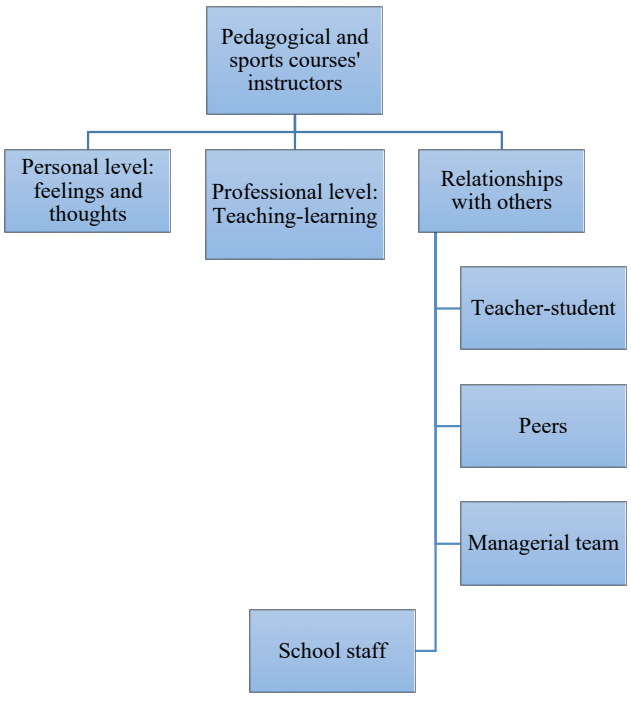


Figure 3. Main themes from interviews with pedagogical and sports courses instructors

Regarding the first theme of *personal aspects* (e.g., feelings and thoughts), pedagogical instructors and sports class instructors were very similar, such as, "How will I teach field experience without actually being in the field?"

or "We have no examples to learn from, this new situation is familiar to all of us." Additional examples of this theme include statements such as, "Planning a new activity from week to week creates an extreme workload," and "I learned how to use the Zoom application, but it doesn't enhance my technological skills or my teaching skills. I actually that I'm in a time-out from real life, and I must survive and maintain this survival throughout the semester".

The second theme, *Professional level: Teaching-learning aspects*, included two main categories: *feelings of frustration* and *necessity generate creativity*, as seen in the following examples: One gymnastics instructor explained, "I had to rewrite the entire syllabus. I worked every day from morning to night planning a new course from scratch." A soccer instructor presented similar difficulties: "I had to invent a completely new course, from the beginning. I used films from the Internet, I taught the rules of soccer, we analyzed performances of well-known players and of student teachers… Yet these activities were just a way to keep our heads above the water! Student teachers will not be able to teach soccer if they don't have the chance to practice, to practice their own skills and their teaching skills in schools." In addition, a swimming instructor explained: "It was a disaster! Or a joke – you can call it what you like. No one can teach how to swim on the Internet!" A track and field instructor also said: "Without practice, movement skills cannot be imparted. It just doesn't happen." When interviewed, a sports instructor stated: "There's no room at home to practice sports skills. What can you do with a volleyball in the living room? How do you teach long jump in the living room, …swimming, exercising? Maybe with folk dancing, you can teach the steps or those who have a yard with a basket hoop." Moreover, the recreation games instructor explained: "Impossible! How can you learn and understand defensive moves in basketball without standing on the court? How can you understand what a springboard is, and what it means to jump and feel the flight in the air? In summary, a pedagogical instructor explained that being a PE teacher "…has become a completely different profession!"

This group of interviewees mainly experienced frustration when schools were closed during lockdown, as they could not assist their students when they were conducting their teaching practice. Although some interviewees complained about a lack of leadership, the main concern was pushing aside the traditional teaching process in favor of variations of the trial-and-error approach. Statements from this theme include: "How much can you 'teach about sports' without actually experiencing sports?" and "We were told to keep the semester going, and that subject to the constraints of the pandemic, any idea would be good enough." One interviewee said, "I felt that it didn't matter what I did, as long as I was 'doing something'. There was no one to ask, … no one to ask for help. I felt extremely helpless and frustrated – toward myself and especially toward the students." Moreover, statements from this theme also included utterances such as, "Teaching remotely without experience with anything related to equipment, facilities, or children is not at all what happens in physical education classes."

The third and final theme in this category is *Relationships with others*. All the participants in these two groups of interviewees (i.e., pedagogical instructors and sports class instructors) differentiated between several channels of communication and relationships with others, including students, peers, and management teams – as well as with the school staff. Interviewees mentioned their *relationships with students*, saying "Students asked for our consideration concerning their learning conditions, the fact that many of them had lost their jobs, and the fact that they didn't all have computers at home…" Other talked about students during Zoom lessons, saying "Many [students] didn't turn their cameras on, and I was left wondering whether they were still in class".

Next, the participants from this group discussed their *relationships with the college management team*, saying: "We received dozens of e-mails from the college management, with a list of "does" and "don't", written in bold, underlined, and with exclamation marks – and with several weekly reminders." This theme also included statements such as, "Realizing that we are alone, we met with our peers several times… We felt that we were dealing with the situation together as a group, sharing our thoughts and suggestions."

In addition to relationships with students and peers, the interviewees mentioned their relationships with the staff at the school where the PE student teachers conducted their practical work. The pedagogical instructors usually visit each school every week. However, as the schools were closed due to Covid-19 lockdowns, their relationships with the school staff were also affected. For example, "We had no communication with the school staff. They didn't know how to accommodate us or the students. We didn't feel like their partners. We were aliens, foreigners. We were excluded," or "I realized that there was no one from the school to take responsibility for the inclusion of our students… we felt like strangers, outsiders."

The second aim of the study was to identify how the participants had acted in response to their dealing with the challenges that arose. Table 1 describes the main themes that were identified, according to each of the four groups of interviewees, with quotes as examples. Substantial variability was observed between the four groups.

Table 1. Ways of coping with the challenges

Participants	Themes	Quotes
Presidents	Top-down decision making	*Lecturers were not partners of the decision making. Pedagogical decisions were made and formulated by an academic committee and administrative decisions were made by the management team or in a limited forum of decision makers.* (1)
	Delegating autonomy to senior staff members	*I fully backed the director of the teacher education program. She has extensive experience, rich knowledge, and direct access to lecturers and students.* (2)
	Coping within the organization	*At the onset of the transition into distance learning there was no inter-college consultation or collaboration. All resources for coping were directed to the college internally.* (5)
	Immediacy, responsiveness, and obedience	*It was fascinating to see the whole staff's – managerial as well as academic –fast response and compliance. That made it easier to cope with the challenges ahead.* (1)
Directors of the Teacher Education Program	Availability of technological support	*We were occupied with urgent technical support for the academic staff – as much as they needed.* (3.1)
	Top-down decision making; Minimum requirements from the students	*All faculty members were required to hold synchronous lessons without canceling lessons in favor of self-learning and/or asynchronous teaching. Lecturers were instructed not to change the school hour system, or overburden students with assignments.* (1.1)
	Assisting the academic staff with technical issues	*I did not know how successful the lecturers were in transitioning to teaching via Zoom. I personally verified that anyone who needed help would get it immediately.* (4.1)
	Collaborative teamwork	*I quickly realized that we were all in the same boat and I needed the lecturers as much as they needed me. We set up working teams, and together we came up with a variety of practical ideas. I provided support in times of uncertainty.* (2.1)
Pedagogical Instructors	Creative responses	*We had to re-invent teaching and asked the students to be creative as well.* (3.31)
	Collaboration in pairs and teams	*The best thing that happened during this period was the staff's togetherness. We worked in small groups, which provided the best professional support.* (2.34)
	Peer teaching	*I gave a peer-teaching assignment. The students demonstrated a high level of involvement in the learning process.* (5.33)
	Small assignments and tasks from lesson to lesson	*As soon as I left the center of the stage, I realized that the students were working. The students became very active learners.* (1.37)
Instructors of Sport Courses	Immediacy, responsiveness, and obedience	*When we were told to teach from a distance, I transitioned immediately. It was a top-down instruction. Clearly everyone was following instructions.* (1.41)
	Survival, teaching theoretical aspects	*I switched to teaching about – explaining, and analyzing performances, teaching the history of the sport, looking for videos of outstanding athletes, conducting self-activity training using videos. When we revert to routine teaching, I might keep 15% …of these*
	Gradually moved to the lesson plan and the unit plan	*There were two main paths: asynchronous and synchronous instruction via the Zoom application. I demonstrated this and the students performed in front of me.* (5.41)
		I referred them to video recordings and asked them to learn how to choose quality lessons and share their judgment on what is a well filmed lesson. (3.41)

College Presidents

Three of the five presidents delegated authority to the PE program directors and the managerial team. However, two were highly involved in both everyday decisions and in the activities of the department lecturers and instructors, holding meetings with the staff several times throughout the semester, and initiating individual one-on-one conversations. They aimed to provide support and encouragement, listen, and stay informed as to what was going on. For example, "I offered extra help to every student who asked for help. I became much more tolerant than I used to be."

Directors of PE Teacher Education Programs

Variability was demonstrated among this group of interviewees as well. Early on, one director transitioned to an involving-collaborative leadership style, in an attempt to engage the academic staff to support and consult each other, as a means for finding solutions to the imposed situation. Others, on the other hand, said that they ensured that the academic staff was receiving technical support, yet other than that let them make their own decisions regarding professional adjustments.

Pedagogical Instructors and Sport Classes Instructors

These two groups of interviewees noted that distance learning is not at all suitable for the PE profession. First, the center of gravity shifted to the theory of sports (to include teaching of the history of sports, analyzing movements from video clips, and learning the rules of the games). Next, the student teachers were trained to improve their teaching skills, such as instruction and demonstration. In addition, they were exposed to endless "material" on the Internet, whereby the instructors had to learn and teach their students how to consume this information carefully, and practiced their one-on-one coaching skills. Most of all, self-learning was enhanced.

Discussion

The first aim of our study was to identify the challenges faced by college Presidents, Directors of the PE teacher education programs, and the teaching staff at five academic colleges. The findings of the present study are in line with O'Brien et al. (2020), who presented similar difficulties and weaknesses among PE teacher training institutions in Greece, Portugal, England, Finland, and Ireland during the Covid-19 pandemic: The initial reaction to the rapid and immediate transition to DL was accompanied by feelings of helplessness and frustration, stemming from the necessity to turn a practical profession into a virtual one.

Among the five colleges that participated in this study, similar managerial and pedagogical challenges were seen, particularly relating to the challenge of maintaining the quality of teacher education – especially the students' field experience. However, differences were seen in the decision-making processes and in communications and cooperation between faculty members at the various colleges. While some school leaders allowed lecturers to adapt to the change independently, providing only general instructions (mainly technical ones), others immediately made the transition to teamwork. Most presidents stated that they did not learn anything new about themselves during this period, except for one who noted that they had learned to take deep breaths and listen to others. They all stated that they had learned to accept and participate in collaborative work, as required by the current circumstances. Such insights are invaluable, as they underscore the significance of collaborative efforts within organizations. The role of collaboration is evident not only in knowledge creation and research but also in fostering student learning and facilitating organizational improvement (Kezar, 2006). Kezar notably advocates for a shift "from 'I' to 'we'" (2005), emphasizing the collective nature of effective teamwork and its transformative impact on organizational dynamics.

Based on the Theory of Socialization (Lawson, 1983), collaborative work enhances self-confidence, especially in unfamiliar situations. Furthermore, learning through experience and receiving encouragement and support from others enable lecturers to shift from survival mode to a mindset of daring to change. Our results demonstrate that during this prolonged crisis, there was an increased expressed need for collaboration compared to routine times. Additionally, we join Wu et al.'s (2021) review conclusions on leadership during crises, showing a small but convincing presence of leadership among our interviewees at all levels who were approached. This underscores that a true test of leadership is how well one functions in a crisis. To the best of our understanding, transitioning from survival mode to a proactive mindset characterized individuals at all levels. Sometimes, when initiatives are not imposed top-down, they can flourish better from the bottom-up.

The program directors express the upside of DL in relation to time management optimization: while daily interactions with other people were lacking, corridor hours were reduced, with no frequent and random visits to their offices and no time-consuming idle conversations that often result simply from office proximity and availability. Instead, there is evidence of higher work capacity as researchers-writers and managers, with an additional saving of hours on the road to and from work.

When asked about the students, our findings indicate that they were not included in the rethinking and formulating of suitable teaching methods, nor did they take part in any systematic learning of necessary digital technolo-

gies – neither as students nor as prospective teachers. In fact, both lecturers and student teachers learned how to use these technologies "on the job".

From a practical point-of-view, the teaching at all five colleges was conducted via the Zoom application, except for during the first week of the transition to DL, when the Unico software was used. Therefore, it seems that directors, occupying a middle ground between management and staff, found themselves primarily tasked with operational duties, lacking the resources to transition from mere survival mode to engaging in a comprehensive approach that addresses social, emotional, technological, and managerial aspects collectively. Similar challenges have been noted by other researchers examining the initial phase of coping with the pandemic in higher education (McNamara, 2021; Sa & Serpa, 2020).

Those who had to really change their teaching style from start to finish were the pedagogical instructors and the sports class instructors. In light of their need to completely modify the nature of their teaching, as also reported by Lu & Barret (2020), these lecturers demonstrated great creativity in their solutions. For example, referring student teachers to quality databases of physical activity and imparting knowledge about how to effectively select self-activities, for themselves and for their own school students. Additional alternative activities included working with peers on analyzing certain sports' skills, breaking these skills down into factors or dividing them into levels of difficulty. Such activities strove to increase the students' ability to work independently, step-by-step, until fully grasping the specific skill or topic. Moreover, by working in small groups, the students learned how to cooperate with others, while encouraging, supporting, and assisting one another.

As the interviews with the four groups showed, there was no dialogue or mutual thinking between any of the five colleges. Instead, each college acted as an independent entity. Moreover, although they were coping with similar challenges, their coping methods greatly varied. However, in light of the given emergency and unfamiliar situation, the decision makers' initial reaction was to be as creative as possible and find suitable solutions – to ensure that the semester was not lost. These were basic decisions at the survival level, aimed at maintaining what already exists rather than ensuring actual process control. Once more, the significance of intra-institute collaboration towards sustainable development is reaffirmed, echoing previous assertions (Giesenbauer & Müller-Christ, 2020). This underscores the ongoing relevance and importance of collaborative efforts within institutions to address sustainability challenges effectively.

One major challenge faced by the program leaders was how to preserve the instructors' academic freedom – a key value of higher education – as lecturers now had to adhere to new guidelines, requirements, and restrictions following social distancing, lockdown, and DL. Moreover, these leaders also had to ensure that all instructors and lecturers received the necessary support and technological means for teaching via previously unused digital platforms (such as Moodle or Zoom) – especially in light of the huge variance in technological knowledge among the staff. Doing so required the investment of resources (including time and money) that had not previously been necessary. Moreover, time was of the essence, as the semester, and the teaching, had to go on. Finally, the course requirements had been determined prior to the crisis outbreaking, and complying with them through DL created heavy workloads for the students – who continuously complained about their assignments at all five colleges. As a result, lecturers were instructed reduce the scope and frequency of class assignments, thereby decreasing their academic freedom. However, despite these challenges and difficulties, many lecturers viewed the transition to DL as an opportunity for the students to transition to a self-learning mode.

For the instructors of sports and movement classes, most types of sports could not be taught or practiced through DL, such as gymnastics and ball games. As such, they could not implement changes that had been made by lecturers of theoretical subjects. Instead, these instructors had to modify their entire class syllabi. In other words, their challenge during the crisis was twofold, as they had to learn how to implement DL appropriately like most other lecturers, but they also had to replace physical activities that were key to these classes with theoretical content, while considering ways to enable and preserve physical sports and movement.

The pedagogical instructors also faced unique difficulties. While most lecturers had to "simply" transition from in-class lectures to DL, significantly altering their traditional teacher-centered instruction and content, the pedagogical instructors also had many additional hours to fill. As their student teachers could not conduct their day or two of teaching practice each week, the pedagogical instructors were required to fill these hours and days with alternative lectures, classes, and assignments.

A prominent lack of connection was seen between the school, the school's cooperating teachers, the pedagogical instructors, and the students during this period. As schools faced struggles and difficulties transitioning to DL, they were unable to accommodate outsiders (Fuentes-Abeledo et al., 2020). As such, pedagogical instructors felt abandoned, finding it difficult to produce meaningful and relevant alternatives to teaching experience. The teaching profession, which is substantially experiential, has changed its face (e.g., Webster et al., 2021). The participants in our study also expressed concerns about future teachers who are receiving inadequate field training,

especially the newer students. It is still unclear whether the instruction they are currently receiving in light of the emergency situation will sufficiently qualify them to be teachers in the future.

Nevertheless, in spite of their frustration, the lecturers did not waste time. Our findings show that ingenuity often surfaced and creative lecturers found a way – as mentioned by additional researchers (e.g., Goad & Jones, 2017; Varea & González-Calvo, 2020) – for activities to take place via screens. Such instructional activities include uploading self-planned activities onto social networks or lesson sites, creating personal checklist tasks for improving a variety of physical abilities, and conducting group activities for dealing with students' emotions that have arisen following social isolation and distancing. The value of teamwork among the faculty has increased significantly, with lecturers often consulting and sharing with one another, while offering both emotional and technical support to their colleagues. Moreover, teachers allowed students to maintain regular and direct contact with them, in an attempt to reduce their levels of frustration.

However, although the lecturers discussed the stabilization of DL as the semester progressed in their interviews, the problem of assessment and grading remained unresolved. At the time of this study, thinking teams were being set up in the various colleges, to establish new policies for assessment methods during the Covid-19 crisis. The main consensus relates to the difficulty in preventing cheating during exams that are conducted online. The lecturers also mentioned the absence of an active ongoing lecturers' forum that could provide support and solutions. Indeed, neither a college-specific intra-institutional support forum nor a national inter-institutional one were reported in any of the interviews.

Limitations

The timing of the research should be addressed, as the data were collected just a few months into the pandemic. Future studies could benefit from conducting similar interviews later on in the pandemic, when DL and Covid-19 restrictions have become commonplace. Yet identifying challenges and solutions in such early stages of uncertainty could help key decision makers enhance their support in more advanced stages of the crisis (Lu & Barrett, 2020) and could be especially beneficial in future cases of emergency. This is especially important as if no rapid recovery in a crisis is implemented, then the difficulties may drag on longer than necessary (Antonacopoulo & Sheaffer, 2014).

Practical Implications

To effectively navigate future periods of uncertainty and crisis, we propose four practical steps for institutions: Firstly, it's imperative to foster teamwork among academic staff. Establishing regular working groups allow for active participation in planning, creating material databases, problem-solving, and collectively evaluating implemented solutions. Second, strengthening relationships between lecturers and students is crucial. Lecturers should increase their availability and support, both individually and in small groups to facilitate independent and collaborative learning. This approach not only addresses emotional and social needs but also reduces the risk of student dropout. Thirdly, promoting social learning among students is recommended. Encouraging teamwork and fostering supportive relationships can enhance learning outcomes and promote mental well-being during challenging times. Lastly, institutions should engage in reflective practices to draw insights from past experiences. By analyzing previous strategies and identifying successful coping mechanisms, institutions can implement adaptable solutions for future crises more effectively.

Ethics approval and informed consent

The College Ethics Committee of the Academic College at Wingate approved the study, as well as written informed consent by email and a recorded dialog of agreement from all participants and consent forms were accepted in advance.

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