

A journey to the unknown: Navigating four faculty' professional identity and vulnerability amidst and beyond the pandemic

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Abstract

Over the last three years, COVID-19 has triggered transformative changes in higher education. This study examines its impacts on the professional identity and vulnerability of four early childhood faculty members in both the U.S. and South Korea. Data were collected from self-reflections and collective discussions. Our findings reveal both shared experiences and context-specific vulnerabilities across the two countries. In addition to the lack of institutional support in common, Korean faculty faced identity dissonance under rigid policies and students' needs, while U.S. faculty navigated tensions between support and standards. The study underscores implications for teacher education, emphasizing the importance of sustained institutional support, fostering collegial collaboration, and prioritizing faculty and student well-being to confidently navigate future educational shifts.

Keywords : *professional identity, teaching during/after (post) pandemic, faculty, vulnerability, early childhood education*

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Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic and subsequent lockdowns have profoundly influenced education systems worldwide, including higher education. During the spring semester of 2020, the rapid transition to online learning occurred abruptly, leaving institutions unprepared and placing the primary responsibility for adapting to new teaching environments squarely on faculty. Faculty were required to quickly adapt to unfamiliar digital platforms, manage technological challenges, and sustain student engagement—often with limited institutional support (Bozkurt & Sharma, 2020; El-Soussi, 2022)—while also revising assessment practices by modifying assignments and exams, extending deadlines, providing additional support, and, in some cases, lowering expectations to ease student stress (Adedoyin & Soykan, 2020; Johnson et al., 2020; Mazur et al., 2021). The burden of this transition led to increased workloads, persistent fatigue, and a heavy reliance on faculty’s personal adaptability and resilience (Jalongo, 2021; Schütte et al., 2023; Tang et al., 2023). Additionally, many experienced a diminished sense of professional identity as they were forced to realign their pedagogical beliefs and modify their practices to fit the demands of online instruction (El-Soussi, 2022).

As the severity of the pandemic subsided and institutions resumed in-person classes, many faculty anticipated a return to normalcy and expressed cautious optimism for the future (DiPalacito-DeRange, 2024). However, the return to campus introduced a new set of challenges, requiring continued adaptation. Faculty navigated heightened COVID-19 exposure, the readjustment to in-person routines (Rapanta et al., 2021), rising student disengagement (Deloitte, 2021), and the need to rethink long-standing policies like attendance (Rapantan et al., 2021). Additionally, a high percentage of faculty reported mental health concerns including anxiety, depression, and stress, as university reopened (Ozamiz-Extebarria et al., 2021). These challenges not only impacted faculty well-being but also raised important questions about how they navigate and respond to this evolving landscape. While a substantial body of research has examined faculty hardships during the pandemic—particularly during the initial transition—there has been comparatively little focus on how faculty actively responded to these challenges and supported both their students and themselves (Xiao et al., 2024). Furthermore, understanding of how sudden, large-scale social

disruptions, such as the pandemic, have shaped faculty members' sense of professional identity and exposed new vulnerabilities remains limited, particularly in the post-pandemic period (Bacova & Turner, 2023; Broadbent et al., 2023). This gap is particularly significant given the central role professional identity plays in faculty decision-making, instructional practices, and long-term professional growth (van Lankveld et al., 2021).

To address this gap, this study explores the experiences of teacher educators in early childhood education (ECE) programs during and after the COVID-19 pandemic. Traditionally, teacher education programs have relied heavily on in-person instruction, fostering direct engagement, discussion-based learning, and hands-on activities with students. In ECE preparation programs specifically, field experiences—such as classroom observations, instructional practice, and student teaching supervision—are essential for developing the practical skills of pre- and in-service teachers (Van Schagen Johnson et al., 2017). However, the pandemic significantly disrupted these experiential components, fundamentally altering how faculty supported and prepared future educators (Lynch, 2020).

Given these disruptions to essential experiential components of ECE programs, it is critical to understand how faculty navigated the resulting shifts in their professional roles and identities. This study aims to understand how early childhood teacher educators experienced shifts in professional identity and vulnerability during unprecedented disruptions to traditional teaching practices caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. By comparing educators' experiences in the United States and South Korea (hereinafter Korea)—two nations with well-established yet markedly different ECE systems—we seek to illuminate the ways sociocultural contexts, institutional structures, and policy responses shape faculty members' professional identities and sense of vulnerability. Adopting this comparative lens allows us to explore the influence of structural supports, educational policies, and cultural norms on educators' adaptations and resilience in times of crisis. To achieve this aim, the study is guided by the following research questions:

1. What contributed to the similar and different vulnerabilities experienced by early childhood education faculty members in the U.S. and Korea during and after the pandemic?
2. How did these vulnerabilities impact their professional identity?

Theoretical Frameworks

Professional identity in education refers to how educators perceive themselves and present their role to others (Lasky, 2005). It informs how they think, act, and engage in their professional and societal responsibilities (Sachs, 2005), shaping their dispositions, level of effort, pursuit of professional growth, and sense of ethical obligation (Hammerness et al., 2005). This identity is not static; it develops through ongoing interaction with institutional, social, and cultural contexts (Beijaard et al., 2000; Hong, 2010; Laiho et al., 2020). The COVID-19 pandemic disrupted the routines and assumptions that typically ground educators' identity development. It triggered a rapid shift in instructional format and professional roles, significantly reshaping faculty identity across global contexts (El-Soussi, 2022).

This disruption also heightened professional vulnerability—a condition rooted in feelings that one's professional identity and moral integrity as a 'proper teacher' are questioned, and that valued working conditions are threatened or lost (Kelchtermans, 2005). Vulnerability typically emerges in contexts where educators experience diminished autonomy, face heightened accountability for student outcomes beyond their control, and lack adequate institutional support (Kelchtermans, 2009). While such vulnerability can manifest as emotional labor and professional isolation, it simultaneously creates possibilities for critical reflection, identity reconstruction, and innovative pedagogical approaches (Zembylas, 2002). As Lasky (2005) emphasizes, vulnerability is not merely an emotional state but a relational condition inseparable from professional identity, shaped by institutional structures and broader sociopolitical contexts.

This study adopts a sociocultural approach, which views professional identity and vulnerability as products of continuous interaction between individuals and their social, cultural, and institutional environments (Eteläpelto et al., 2014). From this perspective, identity is not a fixed personal trait but a dynamic, evolving process shaped by participation in social practices and exposure to structural conditions such as school norms, resource availability, and policy expectations (Lasky, 2005; Vähäsantanen, 2015). Educators' sense of self is negotiated at the intersection of personal agency and external structures, reflecting both individual intentions and contextual influences. Guided by this framework, we examine

not only the distinct challenges faced by faculty in the U.S. and Korea during the pandemic but also the complex ways professional identity and vulnerability were shaped within broader institutional and sociocultural contexts—both during and beyond COVID-19.

Methods

Participants

The participants in this study are the four authors, all Korean early childhood teacher educators with higher education teaching experience ranging from eight to fifteen years (see Table 1 for participant profiles). Two participants held full-time faculty positions at universities in the U.S., while the other two taught part-time at institutions in Korea. To contextualize their teaching experiences, we provide descriptions of each participant's institutional setting, student population, and instructional responsibilities during and after the COVID-19 pandemic.

In the United States, Researcher 1 was based at a state university in rural western New York, where both undergraduate and graduate programs enrolled predominantly white, traditional-aged students. The graduate programs primarily served in-service teachers and candidates pursuing initial teacher certification. Her teaching responsibilities included undergraduate courses, some with field experience components, as well as graduate-level courses in early childhood education. Researcher 2 taught at a public university in Texas, designated as a Hispanic-Serving Institution, located in a region blending urban and suburban characteristics. The student body was primarily composed of traditional undergraduates, with a notable proportion of first-generation and non-traditional students. She taught undergraduate courses each semester, primarily for students preparing for teacher certification.

In Korea, Researcher 3 taught at a private university in an urban center in the southeastern region of the country. The student body consisted mainly of traditional undergraduates. Her teaching responsibilities included two courses per semester for juniors and seniors, one of

which was a practicum-based course in early childhood special education. Most students aimed to become public special education teachers by passing a national certification exam after graduation. Researcher 4 taught at a three-year private college in an urban area of southeastern Korea that awarded associate degrees. Her students included both traditional and non-traditional undergraduates, and her courses focused on practical preparation for careers in early childhood education settings, such as preschools, daycare centers, and related educational environments.

Table 1. *Profile of the Participants (as of Spring 2023)*

Researcher	Experiences in higher education	Country where Ph. D was earned	Country where participant works
Researcher 1	8 years	US	US
Researcher 2	10 years	US	US
Researcher 3	15 years	US	South Korea
Researcher 4	8 years	South Korea	South Korea

Data Collection

We used collaborative autoethnography (hereafter, CAE) to reflect on our teaching experiences for early childhood education pre-service teachers in higher education in the U.S. and Korea. CAE builds on the foundations of autoethnography, a research method that uses “data about self and its context to gain an understanding of the connectivity between self and others within the same context” (Ngunjiri et al., 2010, p. 2). In this approach, researchers use their life data to obtain insights and an in-depth understanding of their sociocultural experiences and issues (Ellis et al., 2011). Unlike traditional autoethnography, CAE enables groups of researchers to collaboratively share narratives, experiences, reflections, and observations, generating a richer, more diverse set of data. Collaborative inquiry not only enhances the breadth of perspectives but also fosters a deeper understanding of self and others within a sociocultural context (Chang et al., 2016). Furthermore, CAE supports researchers in “view[ing] our lives both subjectively and objectively at the same time while assisting us

in forming our identities” (Atkinson, 2004, p. 122).

We consistently collected personal reflections between Fall 2021 and Spring 2023, focusing on the challenges we encountered, strategies we employed, and their impact on our professional identities. This process resulted in a compilation of 77 pages, including individual narrative entries, reflective memos, and feedback exchanged during collaborative discussions. To support and enrich these reflections, we drew upon multiple sources such as course syllabi, institutional guidelines, lecture recordings, students' assignments, course materials (e.g., PowerPoint presentations), and course evaluations.

Following the collaborative autoethnography approach outlined by Chang and colleagues (2016), we engaged in a collective reflection process by sharing our written narratives with one another. We reviewed each other's entries, provided feedback memos, and posed questions to deepen our exploration of identity development. By analyzing each other's writings, we sought to gain broader insights into our teaching experiences and triangulated our data by incorporating additional sources, including news articles and literature on online teaching in higher education.

We also conducted four Zoom meetings, each lasting approximately 60–90 minutes, to collaboratively reflect on and revisit our teaching experiences from the preceding semesters. These meetings were recorded, and detailed summaries were shared among all participants. To facilitate data management and accessibility, we compiled and stored the meeting transcriptions, recordings, and written communications (individual and group chat messages) in a shared Google Drive folder. This collaborative, multi-source approach enabled a comprehensive exploration of our teaching experiences and contributed to a robust, nuanced understanding of our evolving professional identities and vulnerabilities.

Data Analysis

In our analysis, we employed the constant comparative method as outlined by Strauss and Corbin (1998) to systematically examine the collected personal reflections. The analysis unfolded in distinct stages to ensure a thorough understanding of emerging themes. In the initial stage, we conducted open coding by carefully reading through the reflections and

identifying key concepts. Some of the initial codes included “student disengagement,” “lack of field experience,” “technological challenges,” and “limited university support.” These codes captured prominent issues reflected across our narratives. Next, through collaborative discussions and repeated readings, we engaged in axial coding, organizing these codes into broader categories such as “challenges in relational teaching,” “institutional constraints,” and “professional vulnerability.” This stage allowed us to explore connections among codes and compare patterns across the U.S. and Korean contexts. Finally, in the selective coding phase, we synthesized these categories into overarching themes, including “Questioning Our Role as Teacher Educators,” “Limited University Support and Heightened Vulnerabilities,” and “Collegial Support as a Catalyst for Professional Growth.” We then selected illustrative vignettes that vividly captured the essence of these themes, ensuring our findings were grounded in concrete examples. This multilayered, collaborative approach allowed us to uncover nuanced insights into how the pandemic shaped our professional identities and teaching experiences in different cultural contexts.

Results

Our analysis revealed the profound impact of COVID-19 on our professional identities, shaped by the abrupt shift to a new instructional format and limited institutional support. Yet the vulnerabilities exposed by this shift also prompted us to develop a digital professional identity and recognize the critical role of collegial support.

Questioning Our Ability and Role as Teacher Educators

The transition to emergency remote teaching during COVID-19 fundamentally challenged our professional identities as teacher educators in both Korea and the U.S. Despite different implementation timelines—U.S. faculty shifting mid-semester after establishing classroom relationships, while Korean faculty beginning entirely online—we encountered parallel threats to our core professional roles. Our sense of professional vulnerability intensified as

we navigated steep technological learning curves, increased workloads, and emotional strain amid limited university support, echoing challenges documented in emerging pandemic literature (e.g., Bozkurt & Sharma, 2020; El-Soussi, 2022). During this time, we grappled with maintaining academic standards while striving to preserve our identities as relational, student-centered educators. The virtual environment significantly undermined our ability to foster meaningful interaction and sustain student engagement, contributing to the isolation and diminished relational connection described by Scull et al. (2020). Although we incorporated various synchronous tools—such as breakout rooms, chat functions, and interactive digital applications—to promote interaction, these efforts proved insufficient. Students' disengagement, reflected in turned-off cameras and minimal responsiveness, made it difficult to read social cues, facilitate dialogue, and nurture the classroom communities that had previously anchored our teaching practice. As one faculty member reflected:

It was not as relational and interactive as I had hoped. I came to realize the importance of body language and direct eye contact in gauging students' understanding. Most of the time, I found myself as the sole speaker throughout the entire class. I felt there was an invisible barrier between me and my students, as if we were mutually blocked from effective communication. (Researcher 2, personal reflection, 9/18/22)

This shift disrupted core aspects of our professional identities, which had been built around relational, interactive teaching. We had long understood teaching as a dialogic process grounded in responsiveness, mutual presence, and emotional connection (Jonker et al., 2018). In the online environment, however, our roles increasingly resembled that of content providers rather than facilitators of learning. The lack of immediacy and reciprocal communication made it difficult to embody the teaching identities we had developed over time.

My presence as an instructor feels diminished, as if the passion once felt in the classroom has cooled. I have started to rethink my expectations for communication, relationships, and participation, distinguishing more intentionally between in-person and online classes. (Researcher 4, personal reflection, 8/2/22)

Such experiences led us to reflect critically on what it means to be a teacher in the absence of the everyday interactions that once defined our professional selves. The sudden reconfiguration of teaching practices not only altered our instructional approaches but also prompted a deeper questioning of the values and identities that had anchored our work. These challenges were further compounded by the disruption of field experiences—a key component of early childhood teacher preparation and a central aspect of our pedagogical identities. The shift to online learning significantly hindered our ability to provide pre-service teachers with hands-on, experiential learning opportunities. This was particularly evident in early childhood field-based courses, where in-person interaction with young children is essential. The abrupt closure of schools left us crumbling to find meaningful alternatives of field experiences, revealing yet another way our professional identities were being unsettled:

My courses heavily rely on field observation and practicum experiences, constituting over 30% of the curriculum. Teaching without these components caused immense frustration for both students and myself. (Researcher 3, personal reflection, 9/28/22)

As we navigated these ongoing disruptions, concerns grew about the quality of our students' preparation as future educators—particularly their ability to interact with and guide young children. The absence of real-world experiences created gaps not only in students' practical knowledge but also in our sense of efficacy as teacher educators. One researcher noted:

Students who missed fieldwork during their third and fourth years due to school closures are now entering in-service roles, likely with significant gaps in competence. Although these disruptions were unavoidable, I remained deeply concerned about graduating as an inexperienced early childhood educator and effectively teaching young children. (Researcher 1, zoom meeting, 8/29/2022)

When classes eventually returned to in-person instruction, the long-term effects of the disrupted fieldwork became more evident. Students who had missed intensive, hands-on experiences during their early academic years showed greater difficulty in applying course

content and connecting theory to practice. In contrast, students who had completed fieldwork prior to the pandemic demonstrated stronger comprehension and pedagogical readiness.

Even when teaching the same subject matter, I noticed that students who had the opportunity for extensive practical engagement in the early stages of their education, prior to the pandemic, comprehended and absorbed the contents significantly better than current students. (Researcher 3, personal reflection, 11/29/2022)

To address these disparities, we introduced specialized lectures from experienced practitioners to help bridge gaps in classroom performance and field exposure. However, the loss of experiential learning—interrupted during a formative phase of students' development—accumulated more extensively over time than we had anticipated. This reality led us to question whether we were truly able to fulfill our responsibilities as teacher educators and to provide meaningful, practice-based preparation. The disruption not only challenged our pedagogical practices but also prompted deeper reflection on our professional identities and the vulnerabilities embedded within them.

The Nexus of Limited University Support and Heightened Vulnerabilities

The abrupt transition to online teaching during the COVID-19 pandemic exposed significant gaps in universities' capacity to support faculty. Institutions were largely unprepared to provide comprehensive training, technological infrastructure, or pedagogical guidance for remote instruction. Consequently, faculty in both Korea and the U.S. were tasked with adapting to new educational demands with minimal institutional support, a process that deepened their professional and emotional vulnerabilities. Tasks that had once been routine—such as recording lectures, sourcing appropriate digital materials, and designing interactive learning experiences—became formidable under intense time pressure. This lack of preparation and institutional support not only compromised the quality of instruction and contributed to student confusion, but also heightened faculty members' sense of professional vulnerability.

Right after spring break, the university began offering online teaching training, and within one week, we were tasked with converting three courses into online formats. I spent extra time searching for YouTube videos to supplement instruction and ensuring that written expressions were clear, which further lengthened my preparation time. It took four to five times longer than preparing for in-person classes. Despite the effort, students often seemed confused about directions, and I received an overwhelming number of emails seeking clarification. (Researcher 1, personal reflection, 5/25/22)

This experience reflects a broader trend: approximately 55% of faculty in the U.S. (Boyer-Davis, 2020) and 56.8% of faculty in Korea (Lim, 2023) had no prior experience teaching online before the pandemic. We were no exception. Without familiarity with platforms like Zoom or Canvas, we had to learn these tools independently, often relying on informal help from colleagues and online resources. This significantly extended our preparation time and contributed to a sense of professional isolation and uncertainty. As Eubank et al. (2023) note, many faculty in similar situations spent substantial time managing course design and responding to increased student communication, leading to emotional fatigue and a deepened sense of vulnerability.

Experiences across both national contexts illustrate how limited institutional support took different forms. In Korea, support often meant simply providing basic Zoom access, leaving faculty members such as Researchers 3 and 4 to purchase their own equipment—including cameras, microphones, and recording software—often encountering delays due to high demand. In the U.S., while Researchers 1 and 2 were eager to integrate more advanced digital tools into their courses, their efforts were similarly constrained by a lack of funding, forcing them to rely on free versions or limited functionalities available through the university's learning management systems. Meanwhile, complaints about poor online instruction and lack of engagement surged, with students in Korea demanding tuition refunds (Shin, 2020) and universities in the U.S. facing lawsuits for partial refunds (Anderson, 2020). These tensions placed additional financial pressures on institutions already strained by declining student enrollments and worsening budgets. The combination of legal challenges, refund demands, and enrollment declines exacerbated universities' financial instability, limiting their ability to invest in faculty support, technological infrastructure, and sustained professional

development.

Limited institutional support persisted after the pandemic, particularly when faculty sought to integrate digital tools like Canva, Flipgrid, Padlet, Pear Deck, and Nearpod into in-person classes. Despite these tools' proven value for engaging students and supporting diverse learning styles, efforts to continue their use were often met with resistance.

Many of the tools that were previously free during the pandemic became subscription-based. I requested support for the subscription fee to continue using them in in-person classes, but the request was not approved. While one-time requests for materials, such as scissors, glues, and paper were accommodated, there was little to no support for continued use of digital tools after returning to in-person classes. (Researcher 2, personal reflection, 1/8/2023)

This disconnect between the encouragement to modernize teaching practices and the lack of sustained institutional support created new tensions within our evolving professional identities. We were urged to innovate and adapt, yet denied the resources needed to maintain these changes, leaving us feeling undervalued and professionally vulnerable as we navigated the post-pandemic educational landscape.

In Korea, an additional layer of constraint emerged from administrative mandates. While Researchers 3 and 4 occasionally sought to incorporate asynchronous online components—such as having students watch video content or complete tasks virtually—these efforts were blocked by university policies that prohibited continued online instruction. This policy was a response to student-led tuition refund protests, which framed online learning as inferior (Woo, 2020). As a result, universities strictly monitored course delivery, issuing warnings of disciplinary action for faculty who held classes online.

The school administration sends emails warning of disciplinary action for teaching online. Ironically, many students had grown accustomed to the flexibility and convenience of remote learning, especially those who began their university experience during the pandemic. Students expressed frustration at returning to campus, citing difficulties relocating and the inconvenience of commuting. (Researcher 3, zoom meeting, 4/21/2022)

In this context, Researchers 3 and 4 were tasked with navigating conflicting demands: institutional directives mandating in-person instruction and student preferences for asynchronous, lecture-based formats. This tension challenged their efforts to remain responsive and student-centered in their teaching. Further complicating matters were broader shifts in Korea's early childhood education landscape, including the expansion of public kindergartens and intensified competition for public teaching positions (Korean Educational Statistics Services, 2021), which are widely regarded as more stable and better compensated. Many students in their classes requested asynchronous instruction from the university so they could devote more time to private tutoring and exam preparation for these highly competitive public school teaching positions. Amid these challenges, Researchers 3 and 4 found themselves caught between their commitments as instructors striving to meet students' evolving needs and their roles as university employees obligated to enforce institutional mandates. This dual positioning exposed tensions in their professional identities and surfaced new vulnerabilities, as they attempted to reconcile pedagogical responsiveness with bureaucratic expectations in an increasingly high-stakes environment.

In the U.S., university policies during and after the pandemic were marked by ambiguity, particularly around students' mental health, attendance, and assignment expectations. U.S. universities had already observed increasing rates of mental illness and emotional distress among students before COVID-19, which negatively affected academic performance and contributed to higher dropout rates (Leshner, 2021). The pandemic exacerbated the situation, with students experiencing heightened anxiety, depression, and disengagement (J. Lee et al., 2021). As a result, supporting student mental health became not only an ethical obligation but also a practical necessity for promoting academic success and retention. Faculty were encouraged to prioritize students' physical and mental health, consider individual circumstances, and maintain flexibility. However, these broad directives lacked clear implementation guidelines, leaving instructors to navigate complex decisions on their own. This ambiguity often led to student complaints and inconsistent standards across courses, which in turn affected teaching evaluations and overall job satisfaction. Caught between institutional expectations and their own pedagogical commitments, Researchers 1 and 2 experienced a heightened sense of vulnerability.

I found myself mentally exhausted and frustrated with both students and administrators. In the field of education, it is crucial to accommodate students' needs and remain flexible, especially during the challenging times of COVID-19. However, as future teachers, it is equally important for my students to understand the significance of punctuality and professionalism. (Researcher 1, personal reflection, 5/21/2022)

This reflection reveals the emotional labor embedded in faculty members' professional identities, as they struggled to balance compassion for students with their responsibility to uphold high standards—an especially complex challenge in teacher preparation programs. These tensions were not merely logistical, but deeply personal, as faculty found their core values as educators and mentors in conflict with institutional expectations. Although universities emphasized student well-being, their gestures toward faculty support—such as canceling Friday meetings or designating mental health days—were largely symbolic. These superficial measures failed to acknowledge or address the sustained emotional and psychological toll faculty endured (Cain et al., 2023). As Naylor and Nyanjom (2020) argue, positive emotions are essential to educators' motivation, adaptability, and instructional effectiveness. Yet, the lack of meaningful institutional care left many faculty members professionally vulnerable, struggling to maintain both their well-being and their commitment to responsive, high-quality teaching.

Discovering Bright Opportunities in Professional Identity and Collegiate Support

Amid the many teaching challenges brought on by the COVID-19 pandemic, we also gained valuable experiences that shaped our professional growth, as shown in the previous studies (e.g., Kerr-Sims & Baker, 2021; van der Spoel et al., 2020). As relational, student-centered educators, we initially struggled to adapt to the online environment, which demanded rapid development of new pedagogical and technological competencies. Although we had some prior knowledge of online teaching, building confidence and fluency in digital tools required doubled or even tripled preparation time. Still, to enhance student engagement and create meaningful interaction, we actively explored and integrated new tools and

strategies. This process, while taxing, ultimately fostered resilience and expanded our digital competence—key dimensions of our evolving professional identity.

These innovations carried over even after the return to in-person instruction. For example, “I frequently reuse online materials to support participation in face-to-face classes, encouraging discussion and collaboration through tools like Google Docs and Jamboard” (Researcher 2, personal reflection, 4/23/23). In field experience courses, “I pre-recorded orientation materials and held preliminary Zoom meetings to ease access for students. Technology also became embedded in feedback practices—such as using recorded teaching demonstrations and follow-up video conferences—which benefited the whole class” (Researcher 4, Zoom meeting, 2/22/23). These approaches not only reflect our digital adaptability but also highlight how we redefined our pedagogical identity through innovation born of necessity.

At the same time, the online shift underscored the importance of human connection in our teaching. During the pandemic, our efforts to stay relational reaffirmed the centrality of building rapport with students, aligning with Shin’s (2022) findings. Teaching became more than content delivery—it was about reaching students with sincerity and authenticity.

Supporting nearly 100 students from diverse academic backgrounds, I collected their contact information and contacted each student individually through KakaoTalk (a widely used messaging application in South Korea) to learn about their majors, career goals, and learning needs. Over ten days, I experienced the emotional labor and vulnerability of teaching during a crisis but also discovered new possibilities for connection. (Researcher 3, personal reflection, 3/28/22)

The pandemic prompted us to reconsider what it means to teach and to be a teacher educator. In our efforts to connect with students under unprecedented circumstances, we experimented with a variety of communication strategies and digital tools. This process pushed us beyond a narrow view of teaching as content delivery and toward a more complex understanding grounded in sincerity, responsiveness, and human connection. Digital tools were no longer supplementary—they became essential for sustaining relationships and

adapting our pedagogy. These shifts reshaped our professional identity, challenging us to be more flexible, emotionally attuned, and technologically competent in our roles as educators.

As we returned to face-to-face classes, we initially anticipated a return to normalcy in our teaching. Instead, we encouraged a new set of challenges. While students physically attended classes, not all were prepared for in-person learning. Many displayed shorter attention spans and were easily distracted, engaging in other activities during lessons, as highlighted in Peper et al.'s (2021) study. Rather than interpret this as a lack of motivation, we saw it as an invitation to extend care and recalibrate our approach. We introduced small but intentional practices—such as warm-up activities, five-minute games, and regular check-ins—to ease students back into the rhythms of classroom life. These efforts, though seemingly minor, reflected a larger shift in our teaching identity: we were becoming not just instructors, but facilitators of care and connection (Dadatsi & Koukouriki, 2022).

During and after the COVID-19 pandemic, as we navigate various challenges, collegial support—both within and beyond our institutions—played a pivotal role in sustaining our work and shaping our professional identities as teacher educators. As we adapted to remote and hybrid teaching, our professional identity expanded to include not only digital competence and flexibility, but also a renewed sense of community and shared purpose. Researcher 1 reflected,

What greatly aided me was the continuous sharing of resources through the network of early childhood education professors in my teaching area. They initiated the sharing of teaching materials through Google Docs, which not only saved me time but also provided valuable visual videos and activities for students. Collaborating with fellow professors, rather than working individually, enhances professionalism, and I've come to recognize the significance of such cooperation. (Zoom meeting, 12/11/22)

Collegial support involved not just the exchange of materials and teaching strategies, but also emotional sustenance. The sharing of challenges, frustrations, and insights through digital platforms became a space where professional vulnerability was met with empathy. As Researcher 4 described,

The prolonged period of remote teaching led to situations where heartfelt discussions—often difficult to have over the phone—became possible through video conferences. Surprisingly, video calls, though exposing me visually to group members, gave me a sense of anonymity that allowed for more open conversations. These discussions not only offered professional insights but also much-needed emotional support. (Zoom meeting, 5/11/23)

Such collaboration helped us reimagine our roles—not as isolated content experts, but as members of a responsive and evolving professional community. Collegial support not only contributed to our development and well-being but also deepened our capacity to model and mentor professional practices for our students. In this way, the collective effort among colleagues became central to how we continue to define professionalism in early childhood teacher education.

Discussion

This study explored the shared and context-specific vulnerabilities we experienced as faculty in higher education in the U.S. and Korea during and after the COVID-19 pandemic, and how these shaped our professional identities. While shaped by distinct sociocultural and institutional contexts, we in both countries experienced identity disruption, adaptation, and growth. In Korea, rigid policies and administrative oversight contributed to identity dissonance (Izadinia, 2013), as faculty were expected to implement top-down directives with little flexibility or autonomy. In contrast, U.S. faculty navigated expectations to provide individualized support while maintaining high standards—creating tension around competence and legitimacy in their roles (Lasky, 2005). Despite these challenges, both contexts also revealed opportunities for growth, as we adapted our practices and redefined what it means to teach and mentor in evolving educational landscapes.

First, our study underscores the significance of institutional support in addressing the demands of online teaching. As noted in the prior studies (e.g., El-Soussi, 2022; Kerr-Sims

& Baker, 2021), the abrupt transition to online teaching reshaped our professional identity, prompting us to develop our digital competence and resilience. However, institutional support often lagged behind. In Korea, support typically meant access to Zoom, while faculty purchased their own equipment and navigated instructional design on their own. In the U.S., faculty sought to use pedagogical effective tools but encountered funding limitations and subscription barriers that constrained innovation. In the post-pandemic landscape, teacher education programs are increasingly moving towards more flexible and accessible formats (Boivin & Welby, 2021), reflecting both global trends and the needs of non-traditional students (Singh et al., 2021). Our experiences affirm the growing necessity of high-quality hybrid courses that combine the strengths of online and in-person instruction. These courses should offer both flexibility and meaningful interaction to support diverse learners (Kim et al., 2021). As blended learning continues to gain traction (Han & Kim, 2020), sustained institutional investment in technology and professional development is essential.

Second, this study highlights how collegial support became a crucial resource for sustaining faculty professional identity during a time of disruption and uncertainty. As traditional teaching practices were upended, connections with colleagues—both within and beyond our institutions—provided essential avenues for exchanging innovative pedagogical strategies, navigating evolving instructional expectations, and maintaining teaching quality under rapidly shifting conditions. These relationships also offered critical emotional support, helping to buffer professional vulnerability and reinforce adaptive identities grounded in collaboration, shared expertise, and continuous growth. The sense of belonging and solidarity fostered through these networks strengthened faculty resilience and deepened commitment to teaching. As Patrick et al. (2010) note, teaching is not an isolated endeavor; collegial collaboration expands professional boundaries and promotes the development of diverse competencies. Our findings suggest that such support systems are essential for ongoing professional growth and should be actively cultivated beyond institutional walls. By sharing insights and expertise across national and institutional contexts, faculty can better meet future educational challenges with adaptability and confidence.

Third, our findings reveal the central role of emotional connection and well-being in shaping faculty professional identity during and after the pandemic. In teacher education, faculty are expected to serve not only as instructors, but also as mentors and carers—

modeling empathy, responsiveness, and support for their students (Kim & Asbury, 2020). These relational and emotional dimensions are especially critical in early childhood education, where interpersonal connection is foundational to effective teaching. Our study highlights how the caregiving dimension of faculty identity was challenged in culturally distinct ways. In the U.S., institutions responded to the pandemic by implementing mental health services, flexible assignment policies, and regular check-ins with students. In contrast, Korean universities maintained a stronger emphasis on academic performance and administrative compliance, with limited acknowledgment of students' emotional needs. This divergence highlighted a broader tension between upholding academic rigor and attending to human well-being—both of which directly shaped faculty members' evolving professional identities.

Consistent with prior studies (e.g., El-Soussi, 2022; K. Lee et al., 2021), faculty and students in both contexts reported feelings of isolation, stress, and burnout. In our cases, we experienced the added burden of emotionally supporting students while managing our own mental health—an often overlooked form of professional vulnerability. This emotional labor, central to the identity of teacher educators, intensified under the strain of crisis teaching. Yet, it was rarely acknowledged or supported by institutions in either country. As Cain et al. (2023) and Klusmann et al. (2022) argue, symbolic gestures are insufficient; sustainable, systemic support for faculty well-being is needed. When educators are expected to mentor and care for others without receiving care themselves, their professional identity is strained and their sense of efficacy eroded. As Roos et al. (2021) suggest, supporting faculty mental health is not only compassionate—it is essential for the vitality, integrity, and sustainability of teaching itself.

Lastly, the findings of this study prompt a necessary reconsideration of the multifaceted role of teacher education, particularly in relation to the professional identities of faculty working within systems where coursework is often viewed as a means to obtaining a degree rather than a space for meaningful professional formation. While we acknowledge the importance of preparing students for competitive public school teacher exams—especially in Korea, where such positions offer security and status—this exam-oriented mindset often diminishes the perceived value of university coursework. As a result, students may approach their education as a checklist rather than a developmental journey toward becoming early

childhood educators. This dynamic creates a particular form of professional vulnerability for faculty, whose roles as mentors and pedagogical guides are undervalued when courses are seen as secondary to test preparation. It challenges their sense of purpose, efficacy, and influence in shaping future educators. Faculty must constantly balance supporting students' immediate goals with preserving the broader aims of early childhood education. Bridging the gap between certification demands and curricular content thus becomes critical-not only through individual pedagogical choices but also through institutional and departmental alignment.

Taken together, this study illustrates how sociocultural contexts and institutional structures shape both the professional identities and vulnerabilities of faculty across national settings. By examining the interplay of institutional support mechanisms, collegial networks, emotional well-being factors, and competing role expectations in higher education, we identify context-sensitive strategies through which universities can mitigate faculty vulnerabilities and foster more responsive, resilient teacher education programs. Understanding these variations in how vulnerability manifests across different sociocultural contexts allows for the development of more context-sensitive approaches to faculty support and pedagogical innovation. Ultimately, this comparative lens affirms the global relevance of addressing professional vulnerability through flexibility, emotional well-being support, and sustained faculty development as core pillars of teacher education (Brooks, 2023).

Conclusion

This study illuminates both shared vulnerabilities and context-specific challenges affecting faculty professional identities in higher education across the U.S. and Korea. Our findings underscore the necessity for responsive institutional strategies that acknowledge national and cultural differences, while simultaneously emphasizing the value of global perspectives when addressing the multifaceted experiences of faculty in post-pandemic educational environments.

Moving forward, there is a compelling need for expanded cross-cultural research examining faculty vulnerability across diverse contexts. Future studies should explore the

longitudinal impact of emergency remote teaching on professional identity, the formation and sustainability of transnational collegial support networks, and the effectiveness of policies aimed at enhancing faculty resilience globally. Research should also prioritize evaluating the pedagogical implications of hybrid teaching models, analyzing comparative student learning experiences, and assessing disparities in institutional technological infrastructure across regions. Collectively, these lines of inquiry can inform the development of more adaptable teaching practices, strengthen student engagement and achievement, and guide the evolution of teacher education programs that are both contextually responsive and globally connected programs that fundamentally prioritize the holistic well-being of both faculty and students.

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