Scholarly Essay

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Education Licensure Candidates During the Time of COVID-19: University Supervisors' Reflections About the Forgotten Few

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Abstract

Education at K–12 through university levels has faced extraordinary upheaval in the time of COVID-19. As universities and K–12 school systems struggled independently to adapt to rapidly changing demands, teacher and administrator licensure candidates were confronted with unprecedented challenges in both worlds simultaneously. The licensure candidates were the forgotten few, stuck between higher education and K–12 education, while struggling to keep up with the demands of their personal lives and professional futures. With limited guidance from their universities and school systems, licensure candidates turned to their university field placement supervisors for direction. In response, supervisors became adaptive leaders and flexible problem solvers with compassionate hearts focused on supporting candidates' success against all odds. Through the reflections of university supervisors, this scholarly essay provides a window into the unique experiences of education licensure candidates and their university supervisors as they navigate the worlds of higher education and K–12 education.

Introduction

Teacher and administrator licensure candidates are facing an unprecedented time in their respective programs due to COVID-19. Higher education institutions are struggling to navigate the constant changes and unpredictable demands of providing instruction and support for students while navigating accreditation and state licensure requirements (Polikoff et al., 2020; Roy & Covelli, 2020; Ulmer, 2020; Vlachopoulos, 2020).

In addition, many of those same universities are challenged in how to maintain an active presence with students who are enrolled in licensure programs. Traditional brick and mortar universities, with limited experience in distance or online learning, have battled to keep pace with COVID-19 restrictions while providing their students with the expected level of courses and support to meet the requirements of their respective programs (Roy & Covelli, 2020). Even universities with dedicated online programs have scrambled to assist and provide meaningful guidance to students during a time of high stress (Ulmer, 2020). As the pandemic's effects persist and transform over time, teacher and administrator licensure candidates will continue to face unique challenges requiring skilled leadership and coordinated support from their faculty supervisors and institutions.

The present article defines teacher and administrator licensure candidates as those students who are nearing the end of a formal university-based program designed to conclude with attaining state educator or administrator certification for the K–12 learning environment. The candidates are placed in K–12 school settings to receive an intensive, real-world learning experience under the supervision of university faculty and school-based mentors as a final step prior to applying for state licensure as an educator or administrator. These individuals are in university-based teacher preparation programs that develop future educators and administrators for professional placement in K–12 public, charter, and private schools. Licensure candidates have the desire to work in a variety of educational settings to support student learning.

Regardless of the specific licensure requirements, all Departments of Education at the state level in the United States require licensure candidates to successfully complete practical experiences in a school setting (Allen, 2010; Mitchell et al., 2001; Putman & Walsh, 2021). Based on the individual states in which the licensure candidates live and attend their university licensure programs, the requirements may vary for the successful completion of the program.

For the purpose of this scholarly essay, university field placement supervisors are those members of the university faculty who serve as direct supervisors or evaluators of the student teacher, teacher interns, or administrator licensure placement programs. We, as university supervisors, have been the conduit of these experiences in sharing the strife, unknowing, and panic of these candidates in their respective programs. For licensure candidates, sources of strife, the unknown, and panic were directly related to the ability to complete the state mandated requirements of their licensure programs within their university grading period, including (a) clinical practice hours, (b) video recordings of classes for licensure assessment, and (c) completion of university-based classwork online or in person. As their direct supervisors for the field placement, we had to become a confidant and personal counselor for the emotions each candidate has shared and suffered.

During such unprecedented times, university teacher and administrator licensure programs are placing their trust in—and relying upon—the common sense and experience of the university supervisors rather than traditional university protocols, policies, or personnel to support their respective candidates (Flaherty, 2020). University supervisors, representing their respective teacher education programs, had become the sole individuals for whom candidates could share their concerns; it was necessary to dive deeper into our repertoire and utilize skill sets to buoy candidate confidence by continuously supporting them with little to no direction from their universities (Fain, 2020; Wang, 2020). In the case of teacher and administrative leader candidates, support from their district or local site was limited, given that schools were trying to figure out local policies while at the same time managing rapidly changing state mandates. Across the board, these licensure candidates are concerned with the future of their education and their professional lives.

The following scholarly essay is based on what has been learned during a distinctive point in time, the COVID-19 pandemic. Through the reflections of university supervisors, this collaborative autoethnography essay provides a window into the unique experiences of education licensure candidates and their supervisors as they navigate the worlds of higher education and K–12 education. It presents the personal perspectives and experiences of two university supervisors of licensure candidates working for different university systems,

both in person and online; therefore, these are not the expressed views from singular institutions within higher education.

Who Are the Forgotten Few?

In any period of rapid change or disruption, there always will be a group of individuals who fall, are left behind, or are forgotten. Universities and school systems are massive organizations that may not be able to adapt quickly to changes, even when faced with unprecedented challenges—especially during something as significant as the global pandemic of COVID-19 (Fain, 2020). No matter the level of effort, there will be those who are overlooked or forgotten when these substantial organizations are forced into immense change in a short period of time. During the upheaval of the COVID-19 pandemic, licensure candidates in K–12 education programs have emerged as a forgotten group.

While institutions for higher learning raced to realign their systems and procedures to meet the needs of students for on campus and online instruction (Roy & Covelli, 2020), teacher and administrator licensure candidates were caught between the historic COVID-19 related disruption of higher education and of the K–12 education environment with no where to turn for guidance (Fain, 2020; Flaherty, 2020; Wang, 2020). Across the board, licensure candidates are simultaneously students of higher education and novice practitioners in K–12 classrooms and schools who depend on the support of both their university licensure programs and the K–12 schools for whom they teach for their success. In many ways, the unique needs of licensure candidates were not accounted for by either higher education or their respective K–12 systems during the pandemic.

Caught Between Two Worlds

Teacher and administrator candidates have a foot in each of two worlds. For these individuals, one foot is firmly placed in the world of higher education, which is responsible for providing a solid academic program and ultimately certifies graduation. The other foot is placed on the ground in a K–12 classroom, school building, or school district that is responsible for providing the real-world, practical experience that is required for state certification and licensure.

For the teacher and administrator candidates, the disruption that occurred due to COVID- 19 not only interrupted their academic progress but also their placements in school settings. The dual conditions of disruption left many candidates stressed out, scared they will never reach their professional and personal goals, and alone in a forgotten area between higher education and K–12 education. During the Spring of 2020, when COVID-19 was just emerging, there was a faction of teacher and administrator candidates already in practicum placements in classrooms and schools. These candidates were nearing the end of their university programs and were excited to finally be experiencing the real world of K–12 education. Then, all at once, schools shut down. The placement settings changed drastically with no warning and no sign of when there would be a return to normalcy. Many candidates were left wondering if they would ever be allowed to finish the placement requirements for their degrees and licensure.

Oftentimes, in an act of true leadership, the university supervisor took primary responsibility for problem-solving and guiding these candidates through the maelstrom of changes. The university supervisors were working with the candidates in and out of their placement settings. University supervisors serve as the conduit between the university program and the K–12 education setting. For example, the university supervisors are responsible for (a) ensuring that the teacher and administrator candidates gain the experiences they need in their classroom and at the school site, (b) meet the university requirements to complete their degree program,

and (c) gain the necessary prerequisite and relevant experiences that are mandated by their programs to be recommended for their respective licensure from the state.

Even the traditional classroom observation that must occur as part of evaluating teacher candidates prior to recommendation for licensure have been compromised in the COVID-19 environment. University supervisors have been forced to develop new ways to conduct "classroom observations" using unconventional methods. In an example of flexibility and leadership on the part of the university supervisors and teacher candidates, university supervisors have observed virtual teaching in a variety of forms. School district learning management systems are secured such that synchronous observation of the virtual classroom learning environment by external sources is not permitted; therefore, the university supervisor cannot be present in a live online classroom.

Solutions include having teacher candidates record live online learning sessions and releasing the recordings to the university supervisor for viewing. In an even more interesting development, some school districts have no mandate for students to attend live online learning sessions. In these cases, the only option is to have teacher candidates walk through a lesson, with no students present, using video. How does a university supervisor evaluate a teacher candidate on student engagement when there are no students present? That is an essential question that cannot be answered. Clearly, these are not ideal circumstances for observation and evaluation of a teacher candidate, but they are the only options available in today's unpredictable learning environments. If nothing else, the ability of the university supervisors and teacher candidates to problem solve and develop these viable alternatives in a moment's notice is a sign of flexibility and resilience that are needed in today's education environments.

As university programs changed to meet the demands of COVID-19 shutdowns, reopening, and long-term cycles of restrictions, K–12 systems were going through similar changes. Yet, little coordination emerged between the two systems. Higher education and K–12 education operate wholly independently even when aligning systems for purposes of training new professionals to move into teaching and administrative positions. The alignment and cooperation worked well under pre-COVID conditions. During the pandemic, K–12 and higher education systems faced similar challenges, but the mechanisms by which challenges were met are highly individualized within the separate systems. Communication between and within the institutions responsible for educational practicums became a low priority in light of the existential threat to the institutions themselves. As a result, teacher and administrator licensure candidates were often left playing catch-up to find, start, and complete their required in-classroom and in-school experiential activities.

The Changing Role of the Candidate

Prior to March 2020, few could imagine that our world would be changed so dramatically due to a virus. On Friday March 13th, everything began to shut down, and schools across the nation were forced to move to distance learning. Schools of all types were transitioning, many times without a plan. Many universities and K–12 schools had to quickly reorganize and find learning platforms that would accommodate a move to 100% virtual classrooms. It is likely that COVID-19 has forever altered the landscape of how students are taught, regardless of grade level or location. The impact was strongly felt in teacher and administrator licensure programs, where candidates were facing hardships that had the potential to affect the ability to gain the necessary experience to graduate and gain certification. The world of the candidates was upended and candidates were left without direct support from those in positions of power at their respective higher education programs (Flaherty, 2020); therefore, reliance on university supervisors for guidance and support increased dramatically.

As K–12 school sites shut down and shifted to virtual instruction, to fill out the remaining weeks of the 2019–2020 school year, experienced teachers were laboring to become online teachers, and students were struggling

to become online learners. Imagine how a teacher or administrator candidate, learning to function as a professional educator within a classroom or at a school site, felt when encountering the sudden requirement to shift gears and become an online educator from home. Candidates felt and expressed the stress of moving from an in-person to a remote learning environment. Frustration mounted as the candidates soon realized their shortcomings, as they lacked the experience and expertise that seasoned educators and administrators could rely on to piece together an appropriate educational experience for their students.

The start of the 2020–2021 school year was no different for teacher and administrator licensure candidates. School districts struggled finding secure, Zoom-bombing-proof platforms that would provide safe learning environments online, while implementing COVID-19 preventive procedures and policies at school sites and in the classroom. The administrator candidates had to become tech savvy, choosing digital products that would effectively deliver pedagogy to support effective teaching for their school community (Harris & Jones, 2020). At the same time, teacher licensure candidates had to toggle between the world of hybrid teaching, working with students both online and in-person, all while managing students in the classroom and keeping themselves from possible COVID-19 virus threats (Singer, 2020). Administrator candidates, who have administrative and leadership responsibilities, made rounds within their schools, ensuring staff were adhering to the COVID-19 rules outlined by the district; including keeping desks in their marked bubbles with the plexiglass carrels to maintain the distance of 6 feet between desks that the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) recommended and ensuring supplies were not being shared, surfaces were wiped down, and all students had temperature checks when they entered the school and classroom. Then in a moment's notice—due to state department of education regulations and mandates or a governor's executive order—schools would abruptly close, which required administrators to pivot to support teachers to work remotely while trying to maintain staff morale and cohesion.

University programs shuttered their doors across all campuses effectively reducing licensure candidates' access to in-person services, affecting the quality of education support available (Doyle, 2020; Flaherty, 2020). Those services included university-based resource centers of computers and free Wi-Fi, exposing a digital divide among licensure candidates as a student population that no one had expected or anticipated. University programs were not equipped to handle the disparity and, in the future, may have to consider developing free technology loan programs or restructuring tuition to provide licensure candidates with laptops, hotspots, hotspot activation and coverage, and other technology add-ons (Brownlee, 2020) that may be required to avoid a disruption in student progress. Instead, candidates needed to be creative in how to find the resources required to move forward in the attainment of their educational goals. For several of the candidates, who are teachers or administrators, acquiring a laptop was not a challenge, although some of the licensure candidates faced the hardship of Wi-Fi accessibility or connectivity. To overcome Wi-Fi disparity, candidates would need to locate free reliable internet. This was true, more so, for candidates who live in rural areas and are struggling financially to set up a hot spot or where Wi-Fi may be non-existent (Levin, 2020).

Creativity in Accessing Wi-Fi Allows Candidates to Continue in Their Programs

The following example shared by a licensure candidate was not an isolated occurrence. With the closure of common Wi-Fi public access points, many candidates sit alone, in their cars, in front of a fast food restaurant, coffee shop, or hospital to acquire a free Wi-Fi signal when one is not available in their homes. Systematically, the candidates download as many articles as possible, assignments, and messages, which will allow them to work offline. In one case, a local coffee shop manager became curious as to why a person was sitting in their car every evening at the same place in the parking lot near the side entrance for 2 hours after ordering a cup of coffee. The coffee shop manager conversed with the teacher candidate who described their plight. The candidate lived in a remote location an hour away that does not have Wi-Fi and was dependent on completing their assignments in the evenings or during weekends, since their school had limited access due to COVID-19. The following evening the coffee shop manager brought out an extension cord from the shop to the student's

car so they would not have to worry about having enough power for their computer, which allowed the student to complete their studies without duress.

One thing is certain: All of these candidates exemplify the old adage of building a plane while it is flying, essentially taking on risk and uncertainty of a global pandemic in real time. Only these candidates had two planes they were working on simultaneously. One plane focused on learning how to be an educator and the other plane focused on learning how to cope with the complete disruption caused by a historic pandemic.

The Changing Role of the University Supervisor

Due to the unique relationship a university supervisor has with the teacher or administrator licensure candidate, a rapport built on empathy, transparency, and trust is imperative for effective and meaningful communication. Thus the candidate feels empowered to bring their best foot forward in their honest and sometimes vulnerable discussions of successes and areas for improvement as members of their school community. Since the outbreak of COVID-19, university licensure programs have transferred a demanding responsibility onto university supervisors, changing the role of these individuals to frontline worker status. With limited direction from university programs, university supervisors were required to have greater levels of flexibility and understanding to support their candidates. Together the candidate and university supervisor had to cope with the ramifications of COVID-19 personally and professionally. Therefore, the level of empathy was greater and desperately needed to help novices in the field. Consequently, the university supervisor, as a mentor, bears the brunt of the stressors the teacher or administrator candidates expresses with no place to turn for advice or guidance. Reliance on university supervisors in this role of leadership demands that the supervisor maintains calm, is adaptable, and is courageous (Blankstein & Newsome, 2021).

While university college of education programs tried to support university supervisors and their licensure candidates, those programs and personnel were ill-equipped to navigate the ever-changing landscape and needs of the students. Maintaining a sense of calm in the eye of a viral storm, university supervisors had to remain current on the ever-changing state's commission on teaching licensure regulations and requirements. Traversing the ever-changing deluge of information provided by the state commission on teaching licensure, governor's executive orders, county boards of education, and local school districts, university supervisors had to make sense of it all, while trying to provide proper guidance to the licensure candidates.

University supervisors working for multiple university licensure systems during COVID-19 observed the difficulties licensure candidates were facing at their school sites. As university supervisors, this unique vantage point brought into focus the impact of how COVID-19 has affected the candidates' ability to adapt to teaching and leading a school virtually. For example, systems within each state have different regulations for the licensure and certification programs. Each respective licensure program had to modify regulations by governor's executive orders throughout the United States to move the state's governing licensure system forward, thus permitting licensure candidates and their respective university programs to allow candidates to remain in the classroom and at their current school sites. The rules are modified from standard and accepted state practices when faced with such adversity.

Qualification exams and practicum assessments, such as Reading Instruction Competence Assessment (RICA), California Teacher performance Assessment (CalTPA), California Administrator Performance Assessment (CalAPA), California Basic Educational Skills Test (CBEST), and California Subject Examinations for Teachers (CSET) in California, were suspended by executive order but must be successfully passed in order to earn a cleared licensure (Executive Order N-66-20, 2020). The executive order allows for districts to hire licensure candidates without prejudice if they are completing a university-based licensure program, earned a preliminary licensure, but have not successfully attempted and passed the required assessments (Lambert, 2020). In Georgia and other states, changes to the educative Teacher Performance Assessment (edTPA)

licensure assessment had to go through Pearson, Inc. Individual states and systems were slow to respond to the licensure crisis while deciding if licensure candidates were to be grandfathered in as viable educators or if they had to complete the state's licensure requirements. To allow for those licensure candidates to move forward with their programs and gain classroom and school site experience, waivers were granted. As one example of such decision making, Georgia's special commission determined the licensure requirements were nonconsequential for certification purposes and those candidates were no longer required to pass the edTPA (Georgia Professional Standards Commission, 2020).

To be an adaptive leader in unparalleled times, the university supervisor's work is amplified when identifying and continuously solving problems that are unique, while being a positive influence for their licensure candidates who may have lost their purpose or confidence (Blankstein & Newsome, 2021; Earp, 2020). Collective efficacy becomes a powerful factor and predictor of licensure candidate success based on how well the university supervisor shares beliefs about the candidates' capability to motivate student learning and improve outcomes at their respective school sites (Donohoo, 2021). Therefore, the university supervisor, understanding their context and holding steady during unprecedented times (Cheatham, 2020), becomes the person who is the sounding board of concerns and complaints, while keeping their university's teacher or administrator candidate program afloat and moving forward. In essence, the university supervisors were compelled to create their own forms of virtual professional networks and/or virtual communities of practice with their licensure candidates and with other digital colleagues (see Harland, 2020; Hyder et al., 2020) as a means for supporting the progress and development of their candidates during these most difficult times.

Candidates' Mental Health and Wellness During COVID-19

The stressors placed on licensure candidates have affected their ability to be their best possible self when working with students, faculty, and parents. Teacher and administrator candidates do understand there is action and consequence when working beyond their optimum skill level. Mental health and well-being for every stakeholder is the largest challenge that most schools are currently facing (Dennihy, 2020; Earp, 2020). University supervisors have observed exhausted candidates who have not been able to separate their work from home life, since in most cases they are in the same location, spending countless hours working on (a) lesson plans, (b) teaching in a distance or hybrid learning environment, (c) developing demonstration videos to support differentiated learning, (d) grading, and (e) responding to countless emails. Licensure candidates expressed that there was a shift in the demands placed on them which made it nearly impossible to maintain a separate home and work life; therefore they felt as if they were on call all hours of the day (Bintliff, 2020). Boundaries set in the past as to when to contact a teacher or administrator are no longer honored. Parents, students, and teachers think nothing of contacting teacher and administrator candidates prior to the school day or late in the evening by phone, text, or email for immediate answers to questions or to express concerns. For some teachers, students contacting them in the evening for assistance adds to their personal stress levels, but it also shows them that students want to be engaged. Therefore, the teacher is willing to work with the student even though they are exhausted (Bintliff, 2020).

Licensure candidates are second guessing their abilities as educators due to unforeseen perceptions of threat, such as COVID-19, that may cause fear (Mitra, 2021). How candidates perceive and react to the experience of threatened stability is based in self-confidence and security in knowledge of their skill set as teachers and administrators. What has changed is the level of scrutiny where teacher candidates have seen fluctuations in expectations and microanalysis in the execution of lesson plans by their principals when teaching in a hybrid or virtual learning environment. Teacher candidates are also concerned about maintaining levels of student engagement and learning, while seeing an increase in absenteeism in their classes (Bintliff, 2020). When students are no where to be found in the virtual classroom, a sense of loss and grieving (Bintliff, 2020) is experienced by the licensure candidates. Each licensure candidate at the school site expends a tremendous

amount of energy to support students holistically. Candidates have taken personal responsibility—above and beyond what is required of them in the classroom—to focus on the educational welfare of their charges. In many cases, the candidates became ad hoc counselors and social workers to the students (Singer, 2020) at the expense of their own well-being.

Within school districts, superintendents and district program coordinators are relying on distributive leadership, requiring administrative candidates to extend collaborative networks to creatively respond to COVID-19 concerns at school sites (Azorin et al., 2020). Increased personnel concerns, fluidity of staff, and distance learning have placed undue stress on administrator candidates (Harris & Jones, 2020), while trying to balance parent demands and state requirements for the possibility of reopening schools safely prior to eradication of COVID-19 spread at their schools. Administrator candidates, just as teacher candidates, need to acknowledge the importance of self-care and give priority to their well-being and health (Dennihy, 2020; Harris & Jones, 2020) when tackling issues of running a school while supporting the welfare of their students and staff.

University supervisors understand the possibility of going back to "normal" will not occur in schools; instead a "new normal" may arise. The goal is for candidates to transform their mindset resulting in a change of consequence or outcome (Council of Chief States School Officers, 2017; Shandomo, 2010; Ziegler & Smith, 2004). University supervisors have placed an emphasis on empathy and grace in their communications with licensure candidates. To support licensure candidates in higher education, who are experiencing extreme stressors affecting their personal well-being, licensure programs should consider allocating resources for mental health services (Polikoff et al., 2020).

The concern, as expressed by these university supervisors, is that candidates experienced burnout, anxiety, and frustration. This can be avoided or mitigated if the support services and resources are provided by school districts that clearly delineate boundaries, roles, and responsibilities for all members of the school community. Within the school community, a directive from the district's superintendent should be forthcoming where teachers and administrators should be provided the same levels of grace, flexibility, and empathy bestowed upon students. Additionally, leaders at the school district level need to give permission to both their teacher and administrator candidates to prioritize their mental health, well-being, and self-care (Harris & Jones, 2020). By doing so, the needs of the students can be met; thus, meaningful learning and engagement in the classroom is possible.

Recommendations and Conclusions

The COVID-19 pandemic brought to light unforeseen challenges that higher education may not have even imagined for the programs within their respective universities. The role of higher education leadership transferred beyond the walls of the institutions to the very university supervisors who are the "boots on the ground" for these licensure placements. University supervisors are individuals who have direct interaction with teacher and administrator licensure candidates. For candidates, reliance on their university supervisors is paramount to their academic success in typical times and even more so in times of crisis, like these.

It is understood that individual institutions did the best they could when faced with the challenges of COVID-19 and with how the pandemic affected their respective institutions. Predicting outcomes after shuttering universities and then immediately—although clumsily—pivoting to remote learning was not possible. Communication systems and lines of communication within institutions were tested. Some institutions were transparent and empathetic to both their faculty and students, while others were not as forthcoming. The concern faced by university supervisors was how to navigate both worlds, within the K–12 realm and the university's licensure programs, without a safety net. Therefore, university supervisors relied on their crossover experiences between institutions and modes of practice; thereby employing crisis leadership skills

to prioritize candidates and their needs during the ongoing crisis in a way that the higher education institutions could not.

Based on the nature of what occurred during the COVID-19 crises, university leadership needs to think beyond the present and consider what could be possible in the future. What other types of natural and man-made events may strike their institutions, and what may be the effects on their students and faculty? One recommendation, based on events and observations over the course of the last year, is that leadership in higher education needs to allocate funds for emergency contingencies to provide additional support services. Such services may include (a) outreach programs to directly connect with faculty and students, and (b) crisis interventions to support students and staff, including mental health and wellness services. Programs that target candidates and supervisors will need differentiated support and considerations. What may work for faculty of higher education will not necessarily translate to university supervisors. Additionally, support services that incorporate mental health and wellness for K–12 licensure candidates are different from other professional services, even in the face of crisis.

Universities should include plans to address and support faculty who are not digitally comfortable and include an understanding that a lag in tackling this concern affects students' ability to learn and move successfully forward in their respective program. Leadership within higher education may need to consider: (a) how they will fill gaps within their programs; (b) if they are willing to work to keep the trust of faculty and students; and (c) what services might be needed, within their institutions, to promote healthy learning environments. Higher education leadership must consider opening the lines of communication with faculty who directly work with candidates in the field. By doing so, creative strategies may be developed to identify and support candidates who are not digitally comfortable. Additional support services and resources could be made available remotely to encourage candidates to continue to achieve their academic and personal goals without sacrificing their personal life and mental health and well-being.

Insights that began with the arrival and rapid spread of a global pandemic could provide many lessons about the unique needs of teacher and administrator licensure candidates. The candidates have fallen in the gap between the higher education and K–12 sectors. With the support of their university supervisors, these gaps have been patched in an effort to allow these hard-working, dedicated individuals to continue on with their licensure and degree progress.

Despite the chaos of the moment, these candidates have the potential to emerge as stronger, more resilient, and better prepared for anything that may come their way.

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