

Study contrasts teaching preferences, training between educators in traditional, virtual settings

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Virtual schools and courses are increasing in popularity across the country, and a new study from the University of Kansas shows that teachers in online settings prefer approaching education intellectually, socially and emotionally, while brick-and-mortar teachers are increasingly limited from doing so because of high-stakes testing demands.

Nicole Singleton Babalola, professional development schools coordinator in the School of Education, conducted a study of the curriculum preferences of K-12 [teachers](#) in virtual settings compared with teachers in traditional settings. The findings validated her hypothesis that virtual school teachers would prefer a humanistic approach, focusing on the education of the whole child rather than focusing solely on what children learned. The study also revealed that while more teachers are involved in virtual education, very few of them have any formal training in the area.

The study was published in the journal *Global Science & Technology Forum*. Babalola also presented the research in August at the Education and E-learning Conference in Bangkok, where she won the Best Research Paper award.

Babalola, whose background is in instructional technology and integration, undertook the study in part because Kansas has the most virtual schools in the nation. More than 90 virtual schools were formed

in the state in the past year alone.

"I wondered how we are preparing teachers for this environment and how they view curriculum in this environment," Babalola said. "I think we, as schools of education, need to be sure we are making the best effort possible to prepare them for this growing area of the field."

The study undertook a survey of nearly 50 full- and part-time teachers who work in virtual settings. The teachers were asked about their curriculum preferences, training, support, mentoring and related experiences in virtual teaching. Followup interviews asked more direct questions about their experiences teaching virtually. Their responses were compared to nearly 250 responses from brick-and-mortar teachers. Results showed that virtual teachers preferred to approach education holistically, including families and focusing on intellectual, emotional and social development of the child. Teachers in more traditional settings reported they had to focus more on cognitive process curriculum, or simply on what and how the student learned.

The findings validated Babalola's hypothesis that virtual teachers would prefer such an approach. Virtual schools are in essence an agreement between parents and a school to provide online education for their child. The virtual teachers reported they greatly enjoyed and appreciated being able to work closely with families in crafting and meeting holistic educational goals for students. Brick and mortar teachers were limited in their ability to focus on areas other than intellectual development, not because they don't believe in such an approach, but because they have the challenge of not being able to realistically work with all parents and because of the demands of meeting proficiencies in standardized testing and programs such as No Child Left Behind.

"Teachers are losing their capability to teach the whole child, socially, emotionally and intellectually," Babalola said. "Having high-stakes

testing be the focus at all times does not fit the profile of the teachers in my study."

The pressure to meet certain standards has consumed so much of teacher's focus that many have reported overwhelming frustration, which leads them to leave the field.

In follow up interviews conducted after the survey, virtual teachers reported that while they value the opportunities it presents, they are often almost completely unprepared to teach such classes. Many received a "baptism by fire," in which they learned how to develop, deliver and refine virtual courses. The majority reported they had no classes in college on virtual instruction, little or no guidance at their school on the topic and little technical support.

Virtual schools are rapidly gaining in popularity. Babalola said she increasingly hears of parents who place their students in the schools to avoid bullying. Some states are requiring that students take at least one virtual course to qualify for graduation. Parents who move frequently often place their students in schools for their consistency, and they are popular in teaching gifted children so they are not held back by traditional classroom settings.

Babalola said she hopes to continue her research into virtual school curriculum by asking similar questions of a larger sampling of teachers and to expand the study to Texas and Florida, two high-population states that are very active in virtual education. She also hopes to conduct surveys about attitudes toward virtual education among higher education faculty members who are or would be those to prepare new teachers in delivering such courses.

"Virtual schools meet a lot of needs for a lot of teachers and students," Babalola said. "I hope to learn more about curriculum preferences of

teachers in virtual [education](#) settings and how we can best prepare new teachers to be as effective as they can be in this area."

Provided by University of Kansas

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