Practitioner Inquiry: Supporting Teaching During a Pandemic

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ABSTRACT

This article details the author's practitioner inquiry project focused on examining teachers' feelings about and uses of teaching with technology in a hybrid format during the COVID-19 pandemic. Data suggests that the Collaborative Inquiry Group (CIG) and administrative support provided to teachers influenced teachers' positive views and experiences as they started teaching with technology.

NAPDS NINE ESSENTIALS (2nd Edition) ADDRESSED IN THIS ARTICLE:

1. A professional development school (PDS) is a learning community guided by a comprehensive, articulated mission that is broader than the goals of any single partner, and that aims to advance equity, antiracism, and social justice within and among schools, colleges/universities, and their respective community and professional partners.
3. A PDS is a context for continuous professional learning and leading for all participants, guided by need and a spirit and practice of inquiry.
5. A PDS is a community that engages in collaborative research and participates in the public sharing of results in a variety of outlets.
7. A PDS is built upon shared, sustainable governance structures that promote collaboration, foster reflection, and honor and value all participants' voices.
8. A PDS creates space for, advocates for, and supports college/university and P–12 faculty to operate in well-defined, boundary-spanning roles that transcend institutional settings.

Background

In March 2020, teachers at Oak Pointe Elementary School (OPES), a school near Columbia, South Carolina, left their classrooms and did not know at the time they would leave for the remainder of the school year because of the COVID-19 pandemic. During this unprecedented time, the closing of U.S. schools and rapid change in the education profession forced OPES teachers, like all teachers across the country, to closely examine and reconfigure their teaching practices to meet their students' needs. The delivery of instruction needed to be immediately redesigned in this new learning environment. As inequity of technology resources across the district became apparent during the pandemic, teachers strived to teach their students through paper and pencil packets.

As the COVID-19 pandemic continued, OPES prepared to open in the fall of 2020 using hybrid instruction (i.e., simultaneous face-to-face and virtual). The district provided students with one-to-one devices to be able to complete their schooling during the various instructional models. The district's professional development opportunities provided to teachers included a focus on *The Distance Learning Playbook: Teaching for Engagement and Impact in Any Setting* (Fisher et al., 2021) and *Bold School: Old School Wisdom + New School Technologies = Blended Learning That Works* (Kieschnick, 2017). The school district and OPES also provided time to help support teachers in selecting instructional strategies and navigating the resources available from the various learning platforms used during the upcoming school year. However, the instructional shift to this new learning environment using new technology resources proved to be a daunting task for most teachers. Teachers' prior knowledge to connect to this professional development was minimal, and the overwhelming situation did not lend itself to the learning of this new content.

Through a collaborative Professional Development School (PDS) partnership with the University of South Carolina (UofSC) and being part of the PDS Fellowship program which provided funding for my coursework, I was provided the opportunity to conduct a practitioner inquiry research study to purposefully observe and examine the characteristics of the successes and challenges teachers experienced and the collaborative decision-making conversations teachers engaged in at OPES given the abrupt change in their profession and teaching environment. Specifically, I sought different types of qualitative data to investigate the collaborative decision-making conversations, impact on collective teacher efficacy (CTE), and the common successes and challenges identified by teachers when they were required to change their practice.

This research proved to be timely and intentional because it was designed to hear teachers' voices, be responsive to their needs, and engage the OPES PDS partnership in a way that facilitated inquiry during a time when educators were forging new paths to educate students in unchartered territory. Through an inquiry as stance approach (Cochran-Smith and Lytle, 2009) teachers, administrators, and the UofSC liaison investigated problems and contexts of practice, as well as the ways practitioners collaboratively theorized, studied, and acted on those problems in the best interests of the learning of students and their communities. Using an inquiry as stance lens allowed me to place practitioner knowledge and teachers' interactions with students and other stakeholders as the central focus of this research and educational transformation (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009).

Prior to the pandemic, teachers at OPES exemplified an inquiry stance through the PDS partnership due to it being a space for continuous professional learning and leading for all

participants, guided by need and a spirit and practice of inquiry. The culture and environment at OPES through the collaborative PDS partnership was one of learning and reflection as teachers constantly asked questions and sought answers through professional development opportunities such as lesson studies, classes with UofSC professors, hosting interns, and partnering with the UofSC liaison to develop school-wide professional development. Even during the pandemic, OPES teachers continued to make a shared commitment to reflective practice, responsive innovation, and generative knowledge.

Teachers' social-emotional well-being became a priority for administrators at OPES. Knowing teachers could not endure "one more thing," administrators at OPES created dedicated time for teachers to grow together professionally. During this time, teachers continued to place a focus on students' needs and fostered an atmosphere of collaborative learning where they could readily implement new concepts to improve their instruction. To support teachers, the administrative team at OPES created a collaborative inquiry group (CIG) to listen to the voices of teachers and design intentional professional development around their ever-changing needs.

Weekly reflection forms offered opportunities to examine the successes and challenges teachers experienced as they abruptly changed their practice. Responses to the reflection forms offered opportunities for the CIG to design reflective, dialogic professional development with other knowledgeable education professionals as teachers intentionally used their time to prepare for the school year. The CIG, which was composed of administrators, the UofSC PDS Liaison, and teacher leaders, affinity grouped teachers based on their reflective responses and designed collaborative professional development time for teachers to share. Teachers reflected on their successes and challenges eight times through the Google Form Reflection surveys and met with collaborative professional development groups four times during the first nine weeks of the school year.

Collaborative Professional Development Opportunities

The goal of these professional development opportunities was to value teachers' social-emotional well-being and design professional development in a way that fostered and encouraged teachers' voices. Through this process, teachers realized they all faced similar challenges, but did not let that deter them. They believed they could help students achieve in measurable ways through their collaborative efforts (Donohoo, 2017). This time and space allowed teachers to share their expertise, struggles, and triumphs with each other. In turn, teachers gained agency and felt empowered; they acted purposefully and constructively to direct their personal growth during this abrupt and necessary transition. Topics elicited from the teachers' Google Form reflective surveys over the first nine weeks of the school year were used to design topics for the collaborative professional development opportunities. These topics included technology logistics, planning, student engagement, technology platforms and tools, grading and assessing students, and student accountability.

The analysis revealed themes that emerged based on the successes and challenges teachers experienced as they abruptly and necessarily changed their practice during the COVID-19 pandemic. After teachers engaged in collaborative learning opportunities and engaged in collaborative decision making, many of the challenges became successes later in the data collection time period. As teachers had the time and space to ask questions and learn from one another, they determined resolutions through shared inquiry, problem solving, and reflection (Donohoo, 2017).

First Two Weeks of Data Collection

Throughout the first two weeks of data collection, students participated in instruction using a hybrid model where they attended school face to face two days a week and attended virtually three days a week. The CIG group observed that teachers' technology logistical struggles dramatically impeded instruction during the first two school weeks based on the data collected from the weekly Google Form reflection surveys. Overcoming technology logistic struggles became teachers' main focus and concern because they were unable to teach students otherwise. In response, the CIG designed collaborative professional development sessions to support their needs at that time.

During the first collaborative professional development session, the teachers asked each other intentional questions to elicit information regarding what works well and what does not work well regarding specific topics based on the session they attended. Teachers asked intentional questions to process new learning and apply it to their current situation. For example, Christina (pseudonym) modeled SeeSaw to determine which students have completed an activity and how to provide feedback to them. The teachers provided positive and encouraging talk to each other, such as, "What a great idea!" "I will have to try that." "I love the way you did that." The collaborative professional development environment enhanced the development of the practitioners and was conducive to equipping teachers with innovative ideas that have proven to make a difference in student learning (Bandura, 1997).

Third and Fourth Weeks of Data Collection

During the third and fourth week of data collection, students continued to participate in a hybrid model of instruction for two days of face to face and three days of virtual instruction. The technology challenges improved during the third and fourth week based on the data collected through the Google Form reflection survey. For example, Anne (pseudonym) shared, "This week has been so much smoother. Students have gotten the hang of our routines and we don't have very many issues."

Teachers learned how to navigate technological challenges and implement new instructional technology tools in their classrooms during this time period. Tina (pseudonym) indicated, "I found new ways to check in with my students virtually and my students have really settled in to using Google Classroom." Observing successful models served as a vicarious source of increased efficacy because teachers came to believe they possessed the knowledge and skills to perform successfully (Bandura, 1997).

Fifth and Sixth Weeks of Data Collection

The 5th and 6th weeks of data collection proved to include important events. Throughout the 4th week, all teachers instructed students using a hybrid instructional model. During the 5th week, kindergarten through second grade students returned to school four days a week. The model was still considered a hybrid learning model due to one day being a virtual learning day. Students came to school in a face-to-face instructional model on Monday, Tuesday, Thursday, and Friday. Teachers used Wednesday as a virtual instruction day and a cleaning day for the school. Third through fifth grade students continued with a hybrid instructional model attending face-to-face instruction two days a week and virtual instruction three days a week.

Many teachers indicated much more positive responses through the Google Form reflection survey because they saw their students face-to-face four days instead of two days.

Anne shared, "The 4-day face-to-face makes this so much better." Mary (pseudonym) stated, "Being in school 4 days face to face has helped so much." She also said, "Student engagement has been a lot better being back in person."

Teachers became more accustomed to the challenges of technical logistics and troubleshooted those challenges successfully. Their belief or conviction that they could influence how well students learn by overcoming challenges beyond their control (Bandura, 1997) positively impacted their collective teacher efficacy (Hattie, 2018). Teachers made a shift during these weeks to voice successes and challenges related to instructional practices. Mary used SeeSaw for independent work time and indicated, "Students pop back into the Google Meet to check in and this works well when handling the various work times of students." Anne shared, "I tried Jamboard this week for a math activity." The successes with instructional practices lead to a need to learn more about assessment and grading, as well as planning. Heifitz and Heifitz (1994) recognized the need to grow knowledge, capacity to deal with adaptive challenges, and solve problems in the act of working on them as part of inquiry as stance.

Seventh and Eighth Week of Data Collection

Grades third through fifth moved to four days of face-to-face instruction. Therefore, all teachers instructed students using a hybrid instructional model, meeting face-to-face four days a week. During this last collaborative professional development session, the teachers engaged in high teacher voice and social networks as they shared artifacts they had learned about and used with their students with their grade-level teams. The CIG designed this collaborative professional development opportunity differently so teachers could collaborate with their grade level teams and showcase their new learning.

For example, Anne shared her learning from Peardeck and how she modified a colleague's suggestions after one of the collaborative professional development sessions. Through this modification, she altered the instructional technology tool to meet her students' needs and provide her with the data she needed at the time. Mary shared an instructional technology tool she continued to use with her grade-level team even though they returned to the four days of face-to-face instruction. The tool provided quick formative data to guide instructional next steps, which the grade level team found extremely beneficial. Teachers continued to ask questions. Tina shared an instructional technology tool called Scope. Several teachers asked her what it was, where to locate it, and how she uses it with her students. However, teachers did not pose as many questions as they had in previous collaborative professional development sessions. The majority of the time was spent sharing artifacts, which exhibited how they had become reflective professionals and thoughtful decision makers (Eun, 2019).

Description of Data

The CIG inferred from the data that implementing instructional technology tools and learning about these tools came from conversations with colleagues, collaborative professional development opportunities, and personal investigation of the tools. Teachers communicated they would much rather learn from each other than watching a video or completing a learning module.

The challenges that remained constant, as indicated by Table 1, were technology logistics and planning instruction. Teachers indicated extreme frustration regarding technology logistics. Teachers at OPES never experienced one-to-one technology prior to the pandemic. Therefore,

teachers not only were implementing their curriculum in a new environment, they were also having to learn new platforms and how to seamlessly integrate individual devices into regular classroom processes. These challenges impacted instruction negatively and were outside of participants' control. Support from colleagues and troubleshooting techniques minimized these challenges over the course of the study. Teachers indicated they were overwhelmed with planning instruction for multiple learning environments. Planning for the virtual environment took teachers twice as long to plan.

Table 1

Successes and Challenges Most Common During Collaborative Decision Making

Successes	Challenges
positive talk (teachers)	frustration with logistics (teachers)
intentional questioning (teachers)	overwhelmed with planning (teachers)
sharing of resources (teachers)	student engagement (virtual instruction)
instructional strategies	
instructional technology tools	
problem solving (teachers)	
positive feedback between teachers	
encouragement (teachers)	
student engagement (face-to-face)	
student feedback	
parent communication	
student assessment	
student accountability	

Through collaborative professional development opportunities, participants exhibited the positive characteristics of CTE. Changes in beliefs occurred as participants' attributions of improved student performance shifted from external causes to teaching. Technology logistics impeded instruction so much during the first two weeks that most participants were unable to teach a full day of instruction. As technology logistics decreased, participants shifted their focus to teaching. However, once students returned to a four day face to face learning environment, teachers indicated a need to return to their traditional ways of teaching prior to the pandemic. This shift in focus led administrators to design next steps to support the professional development of teachers and their future learning needs. Collaborative professional development opportunities empowered teachers to make instructional decisions together and positively impacted participants' beliefs about their abilities to help students learn (Donohoo, 2017).

Implications

As we continued this journey, our call to action was to administrators and school leaders: give teachers the time and space to share their experiences, expertise, struggles, triumphs, and reflections along the way. Past research indicated teachers tailored learning more to what students could not do during crisis times, whereas often conventional school was about what

teachers thought students needed, even if students could already do the tasks (Fisher et al., 2021). Most schools and educators were asking themselves: What has changed in our world, and therefore how can we adapt? (Kieschnick, 2017). During the pandemic, teachers experienced many challenges around technology logistics and planning instruction for the various learning environments in which they were teaching. Through collaborative decision making during intentionally designed professional development, teachers shared their successes and challenges and engaged in practitioner inquiry to learn about instructional technology tools to best support their instruction. However, the move back to a face-to-face learning environment created a dissonance between integrating new instructional technology tools with the teachers' pedagogical wisdom.

The integration of technologies into instruction made teachers more effective. They unlocked differentiated, individualized, and personalized instruction to meet students' needs. Also, the integration of instructional technology tools gave students more control over the pace, the when, and the how of their learning so rigor and relevance was increased (Kieschnick, 2017). Now that teachers had some prior knowledge of instructional technology tools, more attention was given to instructional strategies, pedagogy, and academic goals that teachers apply to instruction.

The expertise and wisdom of teachers must be valued. Allowing teachers to choose the technologies made them better and more efficient at what they love to do. This autonomy moved teachers toward defining student learning goals and rooted technology in pedagogy (Kieschnick, 2017). The CIG designed the collaborative professional development in a way that tied technology (i.e., new learning) to pedagogy (i.e., previous knowledge) so thinking, decisions, and instruction come from a place of purpose (Kieschnick, 2017).

The next steps for this research, practitioner inquiry, and the growth of PDS at OPES were to move instruction to the next level using our experiences from this research study. By combining the *Bold School Framework for Strategic Blended Learning* (Kieschnick, 2017) and the data team process (Allison et al., 2010), teachers at OPES strategically implemented blended learning instruction using their prior pedagogical knowledge and data-driven decision making to ensure the success of their students during a pandemic and beyond.

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