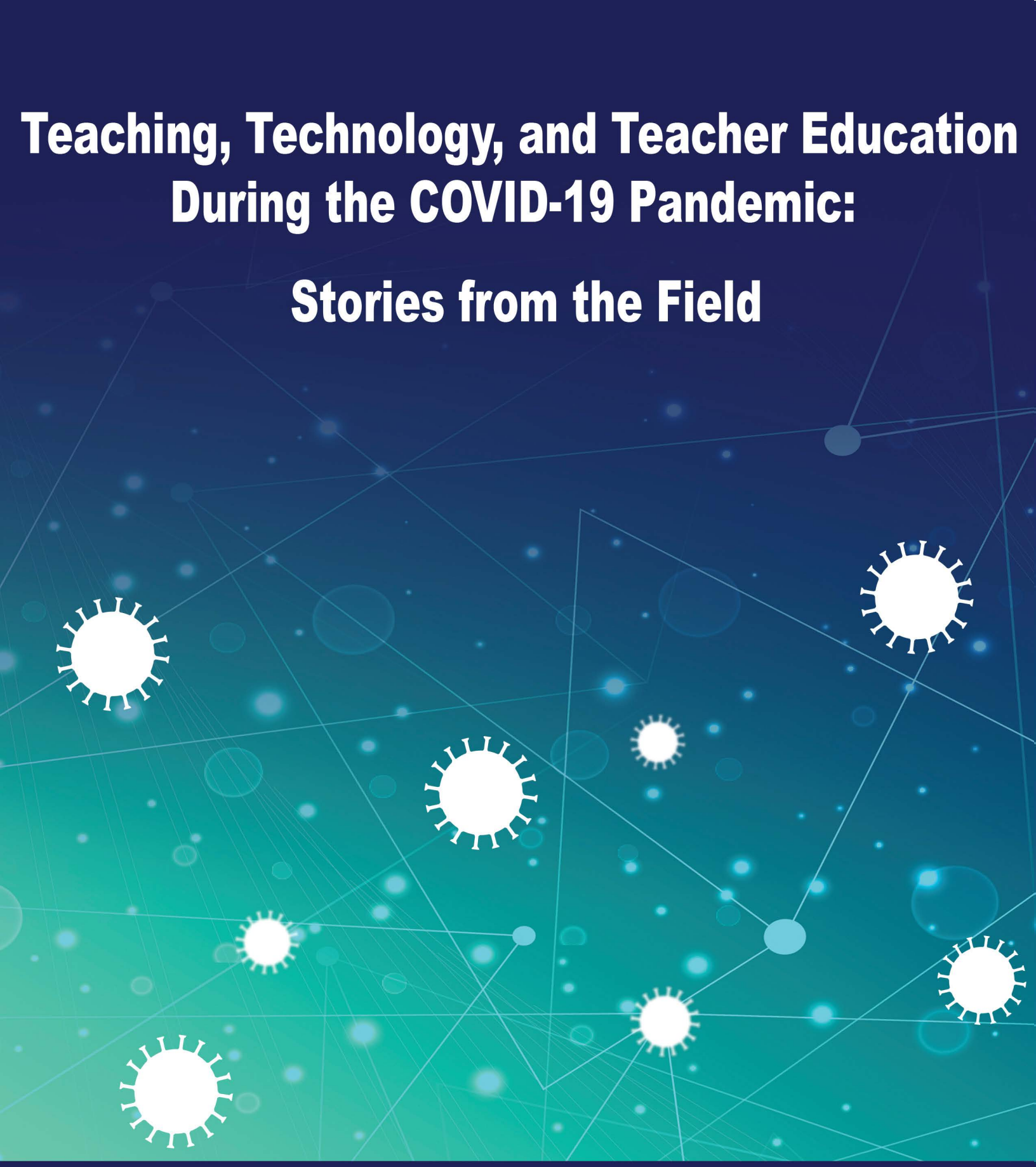
Teaching, Technology, and Teacher Education During the COVID-19 Pandemic:

Stories from the Field



EDITORS

Richard E. Ferdig

Emily Baumgartner **Richard Hartshorne**

Regina Kaplan-Rakowski **Chrystalla Mouza**

The 5-Phase Process as a Balancing Act during Times of Disruption: Transitioning to Virtual Teaching at an International JK-5 School

MARIA D. AVGERINOU
American Community Schools (ACS) Athens, Greece
avgerinoum@acs.gr

SOPHIA E. MOROS
American Community Schools (ACS) Athens, Greece
moross@acs.gr

Redesigning a drastically new approach for teaching and learning within grades JK-5 required immediate attention to all constituents' needs, including students, faculty, and parents, in order to maintain educational continuity in a functional and safe online learning environment. This work describes the 5-Phase Process designed as an action research-based, disruptive intervention to transition from the traditional, four-walled classroom into a virtual classroom, thus transforming learning experiences, routines, and perspectives in the Elementary School at the American Community Schools (ACS) Athens, Greece. This emergency shift occurred simultaneously with the professional development needs of in-service teachers, and was guided by research-informed best practices of virtual teaching, and effects of online learning for students between ages of 3-11, while bearing the state of emotional and financial stress of all constituents. While the 5-Phase Process is still in effect, preliminary results are shared, while implications for practice and recommendations for further research are considered.

Keywords: Early Childhood, Elementary Education, Emergency Remote Learning, Virtual JK-5 Learning, 5-Phase Process, In-Service Teachers, Professional Development, Disruptive Innovation, Agile Leadership, Educational Technology

INTRODUCTION

The American Community Schools (ACS) Athens is a private, large K-12 American International school located in Athens, Greece. The school has developed and implemented its own blended instructional methodology (called i²Flex) since 2013 (Avgerinou, Gialamas, & Tsoukia, 2014; Avgerinou & Gialamas, 2016a; Avgerinou & Pelonis, 2021). Moodle is the LMS that facilitates blended learning for Grades 4-12 along with a wide range of educational technology tools. Throughout this time, extensive, systematic professional development (PD) has helped these teachers to make the mandatory transition to (pre-)blended learning- and as of September 2019 to online learning (Grades 9-12).

The conceptual frameworks that underpin the i²Flex methodology and associated in-service teacher PD, while also guiding the design, development, delivery and evaluation of the school's Blended and Online Courses are:

- the Quality Matters course design standards and K-12 rubric (Quality Matters, 2016);
- the TPACK framework (Mishra & Koehler, 2009); and,
- the Community of Inquiry (CoI) Framework (Garrison, Anderson, & Archer, 2000)

As a result of this focused and sustained, school-wide effort, educational technology integration has become embedded in the school culture thus impacting not only those grades required to make the shift to blended/online learning, but also those who prepared students to make a smooth transition to such learning: the Elementary School (ES) JK-5 teachers (Avgerinou & Gialamas, 2016b; Gialamas & Avgerinou, 2015). Yet, with the exception of Grades 4-5 who receive basic training on blended learning, ES teachers typically are not trained to teach online (Archambault et al., 2016), nor participate in in-house blended or online PD when they join ACS Athens. Thus, once lockdown hit and remote emer-

gency teaching (Hodges et al., 2020) became the new reality, the ES with 41 teachers and staff, and 400 students was compelled to rapidly adjust using an unconventional platform which also led to a necessary pause and ensuing, informed pivot in the curriculum momentum (ISBE, 2020). Entering this unknown territory required a swift transformation of educational technology enhanced learning to virtual learning (Rogers-Estable et al., n.d.). A new process, aligned with the i²Flex school culture and its underlying frameworks had to be immediately designed to allow for educational continuity while clearly communicating the associated vision and steps. Five phases were identified with close consideration to the ease of communicating, and also accessing curriculum material via safe, and user-friendly platforms and tools which allow for age appropriate virtual experiences to be designed and implemented. As each Phase has unfolded, all constituents (students, teachers, parents) have been surveyed for feedback in order for the relevant adjustments to take place according to the school demographics by grade.

INNOVATION

During the pandemic, ACS Athens Elementary School had to swiftly move approximately 400 students between Junior Kindergarten and 5th Grade to an immediate virtual learning setting. The 5-Phase Process (Figure 1) was crafted within a collaborative, participatory action research (AR) design (Avgerinou & Gialamas, 2016b) by identifying our population's resources, teacher's instructional design needs and technology skills, and student body digital skills while keeping the school's mission and vision at the forefront. The 5-Phase Process where each phase was conceived as an AR intervention, was meant to provide all constituents --students, parents and teachers-- with a clear sense of direction at a time where nothing else was secure. Outlining clear and crisp phases was necessary to pave a path for all to navigate virtual learning with approximately a two-to-three week time frame built into each phase so the associated learning curve could easily adjust and scaffold to the necessary online needs.

The continuous collection of different types of data collected from all stakeholder groups, guided the development and progression of each phase according to their needs. Both formal and informal feedback in forms of teacher, parent and student focus groups and meetings per grade, surveys, emails, and anecdotal records of phone calls, together with student participation logs and evidences of overall student academic performance online, each assisted in making informed decisions that shaped the 5-Phase Process. In addition, the school shared parent communication in a daily, internal log called Virtual Stories, where information was consolidated and used for guiding next steps. Success stories were shared on social media to contribute to the collective knowledge of the larger community to implement virtual learning for young learners in an emergency context. Parent letters were sent out weekly or biweekly in an effort to keep the lines of communication open and transparent. Student voices were also accounted through surveys they completed via their daily assignments in a synchronous or asynchronous lesson.

Ongoing teacher PD was instrumental in shaping and supporting their understanding of online teaching, and elevating the requisite skills, particularly with synchronous teaching tools and techniques. Besides whole school training, grade level and specials' team meetings were held as a means to support grade level specific needs and even check in with individual members to provide emotional support where needed.

Figure 1. The 5-Phase Process.

The 5-Phase Process of Virtual Learning

Phase 1 is the implementation stage of asynchronous virtual teaching which lays the foundation of CoI online with the added factor of the technology effects on the three presences and their outcomes (Rubin et al., 2010; Rubin et al., 2013). It begins with teachers emailing students with daily learning objectives in the core subjects where students are given opportunities to create a daily schedule to promote healthy routines for continued online learning. The core subjects assigned in Phase 1 included unit review skills to ease student transition to online learning. Daily powerpoints were emailed to parents (and directly to student emails in grades 4 & 5) along with prerecorded morning greeting videos by the respective homeroom teacher that outlined daily expectations. Every powerpoint included the bulk of the core curriculum standards and was intentionally designed to replicate the familiar learning that would take place in a given, regular school day, per grade. Teachers utilized Google Apps (Docs, Slides, Forms, etc.) and assigned core subject activities by creating worksheets, links to interactive games, and educational sites such as Mystery Science, Khan Academy, TedEd, demo videos for writing and much more.

In **Phase 2** synchronous learning begins in an effort to rebuild student-teacher connections and secure the relationships previously established in a classroom, as well as to support the emotional wellbeing of students. Moodle's synchronous interaction feature (the Big Blue Button/ BBB) was introduced taking into account ISBE's (2020) recommendations and guidelines regarding minimum and maximum times of engagement by each student in remote learning activities. The intermediate grades (3-5) showed greater speed of demonstrating these skills while the early childhood students (JK -2) needed to be divided into smaller groups for more review on digital citizen rules. Concerns regarding screen time were addressed among other design considerations, by introducing a Screen Free day mid-week (Duckworth, 2020) which built in time for students to work on asynchronous assignments such as writing, artwork, STEAM and Design projects, finish reading books, and much more.

As teachers find their online voices and reclaim their comfort zone in working with the TPACK framework (Mishra & Koehler, 2009) online, Phase 3 becomes possible (see Appendix A and Appendix B). This is in line with Archambault et al. (2014) who suggest that online teachers "need to have not only an excellent grasp of their given content area but also an appreciation of how technology and the online environment affect the content and the pedagogy of what they are attempting to teach" (p. 87). Bringing a balance between the synchronous and asynchronous sessions begins in this phase

where a solid framework and weekly schedule for homeroom and specials' teachers is established and allows families to connect to live sessions or visit pre-recorded sessions. Therefore, the basic framework for scheduling virtual courses is now complete and perceived as the main outline until the end of the school year. Additional student support sessions are introduced to equitably support students who faced hardships during these times or those whose parents were working and in need of intervention. These opportunities have included the following courses crafted for our student needs: Virtual Re-teaching Sessions (VR Sessions), ESL conversational courses, Book Clubs, Technology hours, Student Council Club time, Early Childhood language courses & Mind, Body, Soul courses to promote physical exercises parents can do with their children.

Moving into **Phase 4** weighs less on students and parents' shoulders as it primarily provides faculty time to work on Assessment, Grading & Reporting, plan for meaningful Parent Teacher Conferences, and create criteria for teachers to share meaningful feedback on virtual student learning (ISBE, 2020; Persichitte et al., 2016). The majority of these planning times take place during faculty and team meetings guided by administration.

Ending virtual learning with **Phase 5** requires collecting reflections from all constituents during the last few weeks of school (Avgerinou & Gialamas, 2016b). Teachers focus on conducting end of trimester assessments, collecting reflection journals, and preparing a final round of student surveys, while administration guides faculty and parents through final reflection surveys and feedback forms to gauge their perceptions of and overall satisfaction with virtual learning experiences at ACS Athens. The feedback collected here will inform us on our population's needs and how to best implement aspects of virtual learning in the future to promote individual growth and successfully support online teaching and learning. Should schools reopen, the above process for collecting feedback and end of trimester grades will continue in a face-to-face setting. Teachers will continue to send daily lessons via Moodle and email families who choose not to return to campus.

RESULTS

Our research findings thus far are in alignment with the literature in online K-12 (Berge & Clark, 2005; Barbour, 2019) regarding benefits such as higher levels of student motivation and engagement, expanded educational access, high-quality learning opportunities, increased educational choice and instructional flexibility, as well as administrative efficiency. Faculty confidence in planning, teaching and assessing online gradually increased with just-in-time, context-specific professional development. Parent satisfaction has been observed throughout the three phases despite their professed difficulty in providing some quasi online homeschooling with a very low degree of preparedness over a prolonged period of time under adverse circumstances. In terms of the ease in adjusting to each phase, thus far teachers and parents seemed to have found Phase 3 more challenging- mainly due to the introduction of the synchronous sessions, and the supporting technology tools. To date, student outcomes and skills do not seem to divert as much from the regular face-to-face delivery. Yet, the data indicates some newly acquired technology skills and abilities such as grit/persistence, adaptability, and leadership (Kirschner & Stoyanov, 2018) for all constituents which provide a new skill set to teaching and learning. Therefore, regardless of any emergency situation the elementary school as a whole seems more prepared to join the i^2Flex/blended culture of the school in the future.

It is also important to note that at a time of so many unknowns the 5-Phase Process seemed to have helped both with the overall school climate, and the sense of community. Our data suggests that as the model unfolded, teachers were filled with comfort and understanding which quickly transferred to our student and parent populations as a sense of calmness. Once the community noticed the school moving forward in a sensible path, it became easier for everyone to remain positive, supportive, and focused on the academic track that was paved for student success during this challenging time.

IMPLICATIONS

As the old adage goes, *nothing is more permanent than temporary*, and as we all desperately wait for COVID-19 to be muted or cured, this pandemic has probably set the tone and revamped the way education will look forever, especially in elementary schools. Therefore, replicating the 5-Phase Process in any (international) elementary school with similar parameters and context could provide **students, faculty, parents** with the necessary guidelines, expectations and goals that could be achieved by all, thus blanketing the community with a sense of purpose, security and calmness.

In-service Teachers and School Leadership

Approaching the entire enterprise through a participatory AR perspective is necessary. Maintaining strong internal communication from start to finish is a must. Recommendations for the successful implementation of the 5-Phase Process by teachers and administrators follow below:

1. One should begin with clear objectives aligned with core subjects and present students with daily powerpoint lessons without necessarily replicating a school day teaching. The progressively low to high technology approach in support of online learning will allow the school to pick up momentum as teachers and leadership move through the phases (Konen, 2020).
2. An effective means to keep the school's moral high and vision united is to host weekly meetings with faculty and scheduled meetings with parents. It is necessary to coach faculty and parents to remain flexible. Through mainstreamed announcements from the principal's office followed by explicit outlines for each grade level expectations will unite teacher expectations and student engagement.
3. Keeping lines of communication open by providing weekly or biweekly parent letters about next steps is very important.
4. Maintaining strong and continuous communication among school leadership is necessary to align goals both vertically and horizontally between schools.
5. It is important to recognize everyone's needs are different and be prepared to support student learning needs with personalized sessions, both academic and psychological.
6. Collecting feedback in each stage from all constituents using similar comparable surveys along the way is another important recommendation. Feedback from ongoing quantitative and qualitative surveys and questionnaires is a guaranteed way to adjust the school's performance in a virtual learning setting. Data collection needs to be consistently analyzed in order to support design preparations in the event another emergency situation takes place, or extract some of the most useful elements of virtual learning so they can be implemented into the school year-regardless of a need cecil.r.short@gmail.com to move into remote teaching.

Teacher Preparation and Professional Development

According to Archambault et al. (2016) "Despite the call for a transformation of teacher education in the 21st century, surprisingly little has changed (p. 303)". Through the examination of K-12 online learning in field experiences provided by teacher education programs, their study revealed a "slow, targeted growth, particularly in contexts in which partnerships have formed between teacher education programs and K-12 online providers. However, while signs of progress are evident, significant work to move the field forward with re-spect to K-12 online teacher preparation remains" (p. 303). Indeed, despite the fact that K-12 online and blended education is still considered a relatively new field for practice and research (Hu et al., 2019), the need for relevant teacher preparation programs and professional development cannot be overstated.

Technological advances are here to stay, and crises such as the current pandemic only come to highlight the digital deficit not just in terms of supporting technology, or student skills, but also and perhaps most importantly as regards teacher perceptions, attitudes, and actual preparedness. Consequently, teacher educators need to focus on preparing education practitioners to understand that online teaching requires its own set of skills, tools, and teaching practices. They need to support pre-service teachers develop those skills and find their own online teaching voices while being research and theory informed (Hu et al., 2019). Adopting such theoretical and research frameworks as the aforementioned CoI, and TPACK, and working in alignment with quality online teaching standards and benchmarks as Quality Matters® or the OLC quality scorecard suite (Online Learning Consortium, 2020), or becoming familiar with such seminal theories as Moore's theory of transactional distance (1983) and appreciating how it may impact both instructional design and communication online, are manifestations of how teachers should rely on theory to inform their practice.

Online professional development for in-service teachers is equally important. Research informs us that typically this focuses on common challenges for online teachers, e.g. from the first day of school, to supporting online assignments,

and addressing online student concerns to helping with online academic study skills., etc. (Barbour, 2019a; Irvin, Hannum, Farmer, de la Varre, & Keane, 2009). Another significant research finding correlates high retention with teachers who complete professional development. (Hannum, Irvin, Lei, & Farmer, 2008). It is self-evident that in-service professional developers have a crucial role to play in introducing online teaching, in sharing best practices, in supporting teachers develop the requisite technology integration skills, as well as in assisting them to keep abreast with developments both on the online learning research and the educational technology fronts. The design of professional development in international schools in particular should take into consideration additional factors such as the education context of country where the school is located, the high mobility of the teachers, the PD decision-making mechanism of the school, etc.

FUTURE RESEARCH

Despite the fact the 5-Phase Process is still in effect, and data collection and analysis are also underway, a few strongly emerging research themes can already signpost the way to future work. The investigation of the long term effect of the 5-Phase Process on the elementary school culture and identity, teacher practice, student learning, and social-emotional outcomes is a research priority. Given that blended learning is embedded in the culture of secondary education at ACS Athens, to what extent has the current disruption transformed the ES culture into a blended one, and provided it with a stepping stone to facilitate future virtual learning opportunities? As far as teacher preparedness is concerned, how, and to what extent would an online teacher training certification prerequisite (Archambault et al., 2016) in teacher recruitment, impact the 5-Phase process? How, and to what extent the same prerequisite would impact in-house PD decisions? Would a systematic i²Flex(blended) PD program help develop ES teachers' understanding of the methodology as it applies to JK-5, with the view to smoothly extending it to virtual teaching if necessary? How can ES parents become successfully educated toward understanding the 21st century education frameworks and associated student skills (Kirschner & Stoyanov, 2018), so that they can better support our curricular decisions? What would all this mean for international school contexts with the idiosyncrasies of diverse cultures, and high mobility of teachers and administrators (Pelonis-Peneros, 2017)? And, finally, what would all this mean for the ES student in the short run, if a more age appropriate platform (e.g. Seesaw) was to be introduced? How would that affect learning outcomes and overall satisfaction with the online course (Rubin et al., 2010; Rubin et al., 2013)? What would the impact be in the long run for the ES student from both a perceived and actual learning, but also a social-emotional perspective and preparedness?

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APPENDIX A

PHASE 3 TEACHER'S GUIDE

ACS Athens
American Community Schools

ES Teacher's Guide to successfully meeting Phase 3 Expectations

- Synchronous Sessions
- Office Hours & VR Sessions
- Core Subjects
- Formative Feedback

3

Phase – 3
Student Support

Process :
Homework Helper, Language Support & Office Hours

Timeframe :
Weekly

Deliverables :
Individualizing Student Support

GR 1 & 2	Daily Synchronous Sessions	Office Hours & VR Sessions	Core Subjects	Formative Feedback
Teacher Expectations	*90-120 teaching minutes daily* *EX:* *2 x 60 min* *3 x 45 min* *4 x 30 min per day*	*60 min M/T/TH/F* *EX:* *2 sessions x 30min with 2 - 3 students max* *1 sessions x 60min with 4 - 6 students max* *1 sessions x 10 min with 1 student max*	*Math* *ELA* *Science*	*-Clearly stated objective* *- Learning engagement during BBB* *- Practice assignment or enrichment*
Student Expectations	*90 min*	*Mandatory Sessions for all - (students assigned to date and time)* *VR Session per teacher recommendation (students assigned to date and time)*	*- Class participation* *- Work submission* *- Digital Citizenship*	*- Evidence of understanding in work* *- Collection of data, assignments*
Platform	*Moodle BBB*	*Google Meets*	*X*	*Moodle BBB & Google Meets*
Purpose	*Provide real time connections and interaction between student to teacher & student to peer*	*Provide individual feedback and collect formative data on student understanding and progress*	*Instruction of one subject in a BBB session per daily session. Additional subjects shared through daily asynchronous PPT.*	

APPENDIX B

PHASE 3 TEACHER SURVEY

The ES Virtual Trailblazer: What do you need to keep going from zero to hero?

Please answer this short survey regarding your current virtual teaching needs so we can provide customised, just-in-time support! Submission deadline: Sunday, May 10th.Thank you! Dr. Maria Avgerinou, eLearning Director

* Required

1. Email address *

2. You teach *

Mark only one oval.

- JK
- K
- First Grade
- Second Grade
- Third Grade
- Fourth Grade
- Fifth Grade
- Music
- PE
- Art
- Technology
- Greek
- Arabic
- ESL

3. What are you mostly proud of in your skydive online teaching so far? *

4. What is your biggest online teaching challenge so far? *

5. What tech tools are you currently using in your teaching? Check all that apply. *

Check all that apply.

- [ ] Moodle's BBB for synchronous class interaction
- [ ] Moodle (for posting homework)
- [ ] Moodle (for sharing class material)
- [ ] Moodle (Calendar)
- [ ] Moby Max
- [ ] Google Slides
- [ ] Google Docs
- [ ] Seesaw
- [ ] Brain Pop
- [ ] Flipgrid
- [ ] Razkids
- [ ] Envision Math
- [ ] Google Meet
- [ ] Skype
- [ ] Zoom
- [ ] Other: _____

6. What support do you still need? Please check all that apply. *

Check all that apply.

- [ ] with technology
- [ ] with online teaching
- [ ] Other: _____

7. If you need support with technology, please explain if this is an existing but hard to work w tool, or a new tool you would like to learn how to use. Please make sure you specify any Moodle features and/or other tools you have in mind. *

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

8. If you need support with online teaching, please check all that apply: *

Check all that apply.

- [ ] Planning for online teaching
- [ ] Designing Flipped Learning Online
- [ ] Assessing online learning
- [ ] Sharing feedback online
- [ ] Designing activities that motivate/sustain student interest and focus
- [ ] Running effective BBB sessions
- [ ] Identifying good resources for online teaching
- [ ] Ideas for Screen Free Wednesday!
- [ ] Other: _____

9. Biggest Takeaway from teaching online thus far... *