Lessons Learned about Online Schooling for Young Children from K-1 Classroom and ESL Teachers

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Teachers and parents are anxious, even desperate, for children to return to in-person schooling this fall. It is clear that our economy depends upon public schools to allow parents to be fully engaged in the workforce. However, with recent surges in COVID-19 cases in many states, over half of the 15 largest school systems in the United States, as well as many others, are appropriately prioritizing the health and safety of teachers, administrators, students, and families in opting for an online start to the school year.[3] Many other districts are opening with hybrid models which include both in-person and online instruction. Although online schooling this year will likely not be the same as last spring, it is important to consider the recent online schooling experiences of teachers to help support a successful launch to the new school year.

This past spring, we were in the midst of a research study working with teams of kindergarten, first grade, and English as a Second Language (ESL) teachers when schools pivoted to online instruction due to COVID-19. Our research focuses on teacher collaboration, high-impact instructional strategies, and leveraging families' cultural wealth to support Latino students who are English Learners (ELs). Through the process of working alongside teachers during online schooling, we learned a lot about the pitfalls and possibilities for online instruction for all young children, not just ELs.

Below are the main lessons we learned from the perspectives of 63 teachers (44 kindergarten and first-grade teachers and 19 ESL teachers from 17 elementary schools) in North Carolina during the initial switch to online schooling. During online instruction, teachers provided a combination of recorded lessons, live lessons, and small group meetings to support their students' learning. Teachers provided us with information about the online learning experiences of their 87 Latino EL kindergarteners and first graders who we were following as part of the larger study.

This brief provides an overview of lessons learned about online schooling for young children during the COVID-19 pandemic from K-1 classroom and ESL teachers, and **5** recommendations for how to support the continuation of online learning into the next school year.

1. Ensure that each student has an appropriate learning device and internet access.

2. Provide a range of supports to parents of young children.

3. Provide teachers with time to learn new digital platforms to communicate with families and to create online lessons.

4. Provide teachers with time for collaboration and co-planning.

5. Address the multiple increased demands on teachers during online schooling.

There are serious inequities in access to online schooling. Many EL students and families were unable to access online schooling during the transition to remote instruction. Across North Carolina, school personnel distributed devices to tens of thousands of families, along with hotspots for internet access. In our study, teachers reported that 65% of the EL students (57/87 students) required a device from the school district while 29% (25/87 students) also needed a district-provided hotspot to access online learning. The distribution of devices took place over many weeks and 32% of the EL students missed two or more weeks of instruction due to issues with lack of access. Even with a device and internet access, many young children and their parents had difficulty logging onto their school accounts and navigating the technical aspects of the digital learning platforms for online schooling.

The majority of classroom teachers (67%) and ESL teachers (79%) in our study reported that their students who were ELs participated less than other students during online schooling. Specifically, teachers reported that 57% of the EL students in our study participated in less than half of the online lessons or activities they provided. When asked what they wished their school and district leaders knew about their experiences with online teaching, one teacher said:

> *Teachers reported that 57% of EL students in our study participated in **less than half** of the online lessons or activities.*

> *I wish they understood the divide that exists between different families and their access to a solid remote learning experience. Once again, the divide and equity issue is very apparent and is not preparing our most vulnerable, yet some of our brightest students, the opportunity to thrive and learn like they do in the classroom.*

Another teacher, echoing this sentiment, said, "The students that were struggling before, are the ones that were impacted the most." An ESL teacher emphasized that she wished education leaders knew "that it is very clear that ALL STUDENTS do not have the same access to the curriculum."

Many of the challenges from last spring related to online schooling will likely be addressed with advance planning around device and internet access by most districts planning to implement virtual or hybrid schooling this fall. However, many teachers noted that simply having a device and internet access was insufficient; teachers were often serving as tech support for families who had limited experience with technology or experienced difficulties with accessing the class lessons. In the words of one teacher, "Learning all the new technology that we were expected to use was overwhelming. Then, [we were responsible for] showing and teaching the parents and students how to use it." Another teacher said:

> *Not all students had devices, and it took weeks for them to get them, and then they didn't know how to use them. Many students' internet providers and services would not be working periodically, and that caused rifts and time off learning and participating during class and*

small group meetings. Also, I felt that parents had a really hard time managing working and schooling when they themselves are not teachers or technologically sound.

Online learning requires a partnership between teachers and parents and/or other caregivers.
Teachers reported that 50% of their EL students (43/87) in our study did not have a parent who was able to support their child with school work during online learning. Teachers told us that many of their students' parents continued to work outside the home during the pandemic. Looking ahead, almost all classroom teachers (91%) and ESL teachers (95%) agreed that EL students will need additional support for online learning in the future. An ESL teacher recognized the challenges many families face when parents are not at home during the day. She said,

> *I appreciate that my school and the district have openly said that remote learning is not equitable. I have seen this firsthand. Students who do not have a parent at home during the day or who are not able to help them with the class work are at a severe disadvantage.*

> *Looking ahead, **almost all classroom teachers** (91%) **and ESL teachers** (95%) agreed that EL students will **need additional support** for online learning in the future.*

Other teachers highlighted the challenge of creating developmentally appropriate learning activities for 5- and 6-year-olds, regardless of their home language, acknowledging that an adult in the home must be available to support the child's access and engagement with lessons.

> *The most challenging thing is that we could really only deliver instruction through technology and our students, being in Kindergarten, require an adult to be with them to help them access our lessons and activities online.*

On the positive side, many classroom teachers (64%) and almost all of the ESL teachers (90%) in our study reported that they became closer to some of their EL students' families during online teaching. According to one teacher:

> *Some parents were truly amazing and worked from home attending office hours with me live [online] and did a great job working in collaboration with me to help their child succeed. I had 2-3 parents in this category and I really bonded with their entire family and felt a more personal connection than I would have solely in the classroom environment.*

Although many teachers mentioned that the families of their EL students lacked access to technology, they also highlighted the strengths of many Latino families in supporting their children's learning despite the challenges. For example, one teacher said:

My EL students' families were overall very supportive of remote instruction and eager to help their children continue their education in this way. Both myself and the ESL teacher let them know that we were readily available to help them learn the technology and reassured them not to hesitate to reach out for support. The technology was a barrier at first (many parents had never used a computer before) but once we worked with them to figure it out, the students were submitting their assignments and getting [online] to work with us.

Some families relied on support from older siblings, neighbors, and/or friends to bridge the technology and language gaps in online schooling. Teachers reported that 56% of the ELs in our study (49/87) had support from another adult or a sibling during online schooling. A classroom teacher said:

One of my EL students has an older sister who was able to help with lessons and technology and one had a cousin who was able to do the same (family support was big).

Teachers reported that some of the support came from older siblings as young as second grade, who were, of course, also expected to be engaging with their own teacher for remote learning at the same time.

Teachers leveraged multiple digital learning platforms to support multilingual communication and instruction. Most classroom teachers (86%) and ESL teachers (90%) in our study reported that they had the support they needed to use technology to create lessons for their ELs. Teachers described using online videoconferencing in a variety of ways, from one-on-one reading lessons with an individual student to hosting a daily Class Circle with the entire class to start the day. Many teachers emphasized the value of learning platforms that allowed for two-way translation for communicating with families in their home language, such as TalkingPoints, Class Dojo, and Seesaw.

I did enjoy using the TalkingPoints application that supported my communication with my ESL families. I was able to check the social and emotional well-being of my families, even if I was unable to get them to complete academic work.

Seesaw worked well for me during remote teaching because students could show their understanding in various ways. Screencasts allowed me to go over slides as if we were in person while narrating important parts or modeling processes.

My students…were very successful using Seesaw. I love that it allows parents to select their home language and translates any messages I send to them into their home language and translates messages from them into English for me.

Several teachers embraced the opportunity to discover new digital learning platforms, especially those that allowed for student engagement and feedback from the teacher, such as Pear Deck for young students. Other

teachers emphasized low-tech approaches for communicating with families such as texting and phone calls. One teacher said, "When I was able to text parents each week to remind them of their meeting time, I had a higher attendance rate."

Teacher collaboration supports instruction and learning. Almost all classroom teachers (98%) reported being able to collaborate with their grade-level Professional Learning Team (PLT) and the ESL teacher (82%) which was viewed a source of support during online schooling. Similarly, ESL teachers (90%) reported collaboration with the classroom teacher as supportive.

> *I feel that most of my team worked well trying to share the load of coming up with creative, rigorous, and meaningful activities that kept our students engaged in some form of learning.*
> *My collaboration with my kindergarten team helped the success of my students. We divided and conquered the presentation of materials for students.*

It is vital that teachers are allowed time and space to work collaboratively and create lessons to modify instruction for students at different levels of academic achievement and English proficiency levels. Both teachers and children benefit from a team approach to online learning.

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Teachers juggled multiple increased demands during online schooling. Teachers shared the significant personal challenges they faced, as well as the emotional toll of supporting their students and their families during the pandemic. Teachers described going above and beyond typical expectations to connect with their students and their families, to ensure that they had a device and hotspot, access to food, and ongoing connections with their teachers and their school. One ESL teacher said, "It is exhausting and much harder than being in a classroom." Another ESL teacher said that she wished education leaders understood the challenges.

> *It has been very hard. We have had to put in a great number of hours to be able to support our students, families, teachers, and staff to connect. We have worked overtime, on weekends, and nighttime to allow parents that work to receive the information they needed. We have advocated for our students that needed devices, hot spots, food, and counseling. We have made an enormous amount of calls to connect with families and understand their needs, provide assistance, and support classroom teachers.*

One teacher described the learning curve for adapting her instruction to remote teaching and the difficulties in reaching her students who were ELs.

> *Learning all of the new technology was challenging...Finding quiet time to record lessons with my own children home. It was incredibly challenging to teach the parents how to support their children and complete the lessons at home in ENGLISH. It was nearly impossible with our Spanish speaking families. I did find help with Google Translate and sending text messages to my families.*

Other teachers highlighted the challenges of online schooling while caring for their own families. "I wish they knew how difficult and time consuming it was to manage, especially for those of us that have our own school aged children to teach as well."

Conversely, a few teachers noted that the transition to online instruction positively impacted their teaching. One simply said she wished education leaders knew that "I LOVED IT." Another teacher specifically mentioned the growth in her own technology skills, while one teacher said that "...remote learning strengthened me as a teacher, introduced me to more resources."

RECOMMENDATIONS

It is important for education leaders, parents, and policy makers to consider the experiences of teachers as they plan for the continuation of online schooling into the next school year. Based on what we learned from the teachers in our study, we offer the following recommendations.

1. Ensure that each student has an appropriate learning device and internet access. It is vital that students and families know how to use both the device and the various learning platforms. Districts should provide access to tech support for parents and caregivers in their home language.

2. Provide a range of supports to parents of young children. Online schooling is a true partnership between the teacher and the parent and/or caregiver. Districts should provide opportunities for parents to learn how to log into district learning platforms and how to use district communication tools. It is important for information to be shared with parents in their home languages. Additional support may be necessary for children whose parents are continuing to work.

3. Provide teachers with time to learn new digital learning platforms to communicate with families and to create online lessons. Teachers need time to learn new digital platforms as well as to work collaboratively with colleagues to leverage technology that supports communication and online instruction. Ensure that teachers are paid for the extra time needed to engage in continuous professional learning and application of new digital learning platforms.

4. Provide teachers with time for collaboration and co-planning. When classroom teachers and specialists such as ESL teachers collaborate, there are clear benefits for students. Productive access to online schooling for young students requires intentional collaboration between classroom teachers and specialists. Providing protected time during teachers' work week for meaningful collaboration and planning is crucial to align instruction across classroom instruction and support services such as ESL.

5. Address the multiple increased demands on teachers during online schooling. There were significant challenges faced by many teachers to support the families and students from their classrooms as well as their own families. Given the teachers' descriptions of their extraordinary efforts to support students and families during the abrupt pivot to online schooling, ways to further support teachers should be considered, including increased access to tech support and counseling services for families.

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[3] https://www.edweek.org/ew/section/multimedia/school-districts-reopening-plans-a-snapshot.html