Perceived Effectiveness of Virtual Mentoring and Coaching on Teachers' of ELL's Pedagogical Practices During COVID-19

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Abstract

The purpose of this mixed methods study was to determine teachers' perceptions of Project Massive Open Online Professional Individualized Learning (MOOPIL) Virtual Professional Development and the role it played in their pedagogical practices as they transitioned from face-to-face to online instruction during the initial months of the COVID-19 pandemic. We applied a mixed method approach to understand the experiences of educators engaged in virtual professional development, virtual mentoring and coaching, and an online learning community during a global pandemic in the Spring of 2020. Participants reported various ways Project MOOPIL impacted their experiences as educators. Teachers' personal experiences in online learning through Project MOOPIL provided insight into the comparable experiences of students who were immersed in online education as well. Teachers reported a successful transfer of knowledge from this experience to their new distance learning domains that not only catered to the

needs of ELs in their classes but to native English speakers as well. Furthermore, through their participation in VPLCs and engagement in Project MOOPIL VMC, participants demonstrated the ability to access and benefit from virtual collaborative support even when life got challenging. In this study, we examined virtual professional development intersectionality, distance learning, and the needs of emergent English speakers.

Keywords: Virtual mentoring, virtual learning, professional development

Introduction

In March of 2020, all Texas K-12 schools and universities were closed until April due to the COVID-19 pandemic outbreak. As the April 10th deadline came for students and teachers to return to the classroom, Texas's governor announced that schools would continue to remain closed until the end of the school year (Swaby, April 17, 2020). During this time, school operations shifted from school buildings to kitchens, living rooms, and home offices. Many Texas teachers were given two weeks to create online content for their students regardless of grade or age range, and then were asked by their districts to teach those students virtually. This dynamic shift in protocol left many teachers at a loss; without proper training and equipment, instruction in virtual classrooms appeared limited. Before the pandemic, the goal of Project MOOPIL (Irby, 2015) was to enhance teachers' instructional capacities through what Irby (2015) defined in triplicate as virtual professional development (VPD) with a unique combination of virtual mentoring and coaching (VMC) and virtual professional learning communities (VPLCs) as they earned the professional development hours required for continuing teachers' certification. The purpose of this study was to determine Texas teachers' perceptions of their participation in Project MOOPIL VMC, VPD, and VPLCs (Irby, 2015) and its impact on their experience and pedagogical practices teaching emergent English speakers as they transitioned from classroom to virtual instruction during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Context of the Study

This mixed method study of teachers in Virtual Mentoring and Coaching (VMC) during COVID-19 is situated within the context of a more extensive study, titled Project Massive Open Online Professional Individualized Learning (MOOPIL), a five-year project using subsidized Virtual Professional Development (VPD) to increase the instructional capacity of teachers, administrators, parents, and paraprofessionals who serve English learners (ELs) and economically challenged students. The online learning modules contain specific objectives, instruction based on

research, online discussion boards, reflection prompts, and assessments (Irby, 2015). Project MOOPIL is funded through the National Professional Development Grant from the U.S. Department of Education, Office of English Language Acquisition (T365Z170192).

Over the five years of the grant, the goal of Project MOOPIL has been to prepare 2500 in-service teachers for making appropriate pedagogical decisions regarding the education of ELs and to offer 100 administrators, 100 paraprofessionals, and 100 parent/family members professional development to better understand and implement instructional strategies for ELs at school and at home. This VPD was implemented by creating replicable online modules that are used with Virtual Professional Learning Communities (VPLC) or by individual teachers to improve their instruction. Each online module provides one hour of instruction. Teachers, administrators, and paraprofessionals engage in the online modules via Canvas and earn one hour of continuing professional education credit per module.

Irby et al. (2017) developed a multi-step, replicable process for Project MOOPIL modules with a process called L.E.A.D.E.R. (Leading Question, Engagement, Applied Research, Discussion, Example(s), and Reflection). The online modules begin with **L**eading questions that the teachers explore as they progress through the module. An **E**ngagement activity follows, which can consist of a video, quote, or other activity to set the stage for the remainder of the module. In the **A**pplied Research section, information from relevant research studies is presented. This is followed by a **D**iscussion in which teachers can examine how they are using the EL strategies in their classrooms. **E**xamples of applications of the topic are shared from the teachers' or the leaders' perspectives. Finally, there is a **R**eflection based on the Brown and Irby (2001) Reflection Cycle, which actually ends with the fifth step of transformation.

The project provides participants with a convenient online portal (Canvas) to improve the implementation of instructional strategies for English learners via online "work at your own pace" modules and live-recorded professional development seminars. The university provides professional development certificates for the units as continuing professional development for participants' professional evaluation and improvement. The online modules highlight various evidence-based strategies, are helpful in multiple learning environments, and are effective for a wide range of learners.

According to researchers (Irby et al., 2012), successful PD for teachers of ELs does the following:

1. Reflects best available research and practice related to teaching Els

2. Facilitates teachers' development in subject-matter content, ESL/Bilingual teaching strategies, use of integrated technologies, and other essential elements in teaching standards-aligned curriculum
3. Encourages teachers' improvement in practice through inquiry
4. Involves substantial on-going time commitment on the part of the teachers and the developers
5. Is assessed related to the impact on teacher effectiveness and ELs' learning, and this assessment guides subsequent professional development efforts. (p. 2)

Project MOOPIL had effective implementation in its first four years, with widespread participation of 2,000 teachers, 163 administrators, 133 paraprofessionals, and 117 parents/guardians from Fall of 2017 to Spring of 2021. Participants reported positive learning outcomes and an appreciation for Project MOOPIL as an accessible vehicle for increasing their instructional capacity to educate English learners at school or at home. In this study, we sought to understand how Texas teachers applied what they learned and experienced during Project MOOPIL to meet these unprecedented needs during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Project MOOPIL utilizes VMC in a VPLC to assist teachers, administrators, paraprofessionals, and parents in making appropriate pedagogical decisions for English learners (ELs) in K-12 classrooms. As COVID-19 spread throughout the United States, educators became increasingly concerned about how their students (ELs or otherwise) transitioned to distance learning. Etchells et al., (2021) found that teachers in their study were spending extra time beyond their regular teaching duties to pivot their approaches and meet new student needs, and this demand took a toll on them.

COVID-19 and Schools

The novel coronavirus, or COVID-19, pandemic struck the United States in January of 2020. However, cases went largely undiagnosed and, by March of 2020, the nation was caught in the throes of a global epidemic. Under the Center for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) advice, superintendents of school districts across Texas and the United States began to close schools following spring break in March, maintaining that they would reopen in early April. As COVID-19 cases continued to rise, it was uncertain how school districts would respond to the threat. Ultimately, most schools did not reopen their classrooms for the remainder of the school year, and schooling continued to occur remotely through virtual platforms.

During this time, Texas teachers were tasked by district administrations to make sure their students continued to receive effective

instruction. Teachers had limited resources for creating content for students and little training in delivering online education. Additionally, students who had higher needs, such as socio-economically challenged students and emergent English speakers, faced obstacles to learning that included limited access to technology and the internet at home, critical components required for participation in online learning (Lazarin, 2020; Means & Neisler, 2021).

Many Texas teachers could not return to their classrooms to gather materials before beginning online instruction, which added another layer of distress. Teachers felt pressure from their administration (Etchells et al., 2021), and they also were concerned about how to connect with students both virtually and outside of the online platforms (Miller, 2021). Their feelings around these experiences during that time ranged from depression and anxiety to frustration and anger.

In the spring of 2020, the Project MOOPIL team members virtually mentored 38 randomly selected elementary and secondary teachers for eight weeks. The participants were divided into groups to form VPLCs. The groups were created based on participants' availability. Each week, three to seven modules were assigned to the participants for review. Participants were responsible for completing each online module independently. Then, the participants met with mentors virtually to discuss and review the modules. The first two weekly sessions were facilitated solely by the project mentors. After that, each participating teacher selected and reviewed an online module with their cohort group, and they co-facilitated meetings with the mentor.

Aim and Research Questions

The purpose of this mixed method (Creswell, 2012) study was to determine the perceived effectiveness of Project MOOPIL's VPD, VPLCs, and VMC (Lynch., 2021; Irby, 2015) on Texas teachers' of Els pedagogical practices during the COVID-19 pandemic. The research questions that guided our study were (a) How did the shift from in-person to remote teaching impact educator pedagogical practices and experiences during the initial months of the COVID-19 pandemic? (b) What role did their engagement in Project MOOPIL VPD, VMC, and VPLCs play in this experience? and (c) How did educators incorporate content from Project MOOPIL (Lynch et al., 2021; Irby, 2015) into distance teaching practices?

Theoretical Framework

We drew on the theoretical assumptions from the transfer of learning theory (Perkins & Salomon, 1992; Salomon & Perkins, 1989) and the adult learning theory (Baumgartner et al., 2003; Knowles et al., 2015) in our study.

The two theories contributed to the framework for the planning and development of this study.

We also drew from adult learning theory under the premise that adult learners examine and analyze information to form new knowledge. Adult learning theory's theoretical tenets highlight the importance of participants constructing their knowledge through discussion and reflections as well as making connections to and building on their previous knowledge (Knowles et al., 2015). This was incorporated in the design of the initial Project MOOPIL study (Lynch et al., 2021; Irby, 2015). This theory was also appropriate for our research as it helped in interpreting how educators advanced their teaching pedagogies through rich opportunities of interactions with mentors, coaches, and peers.

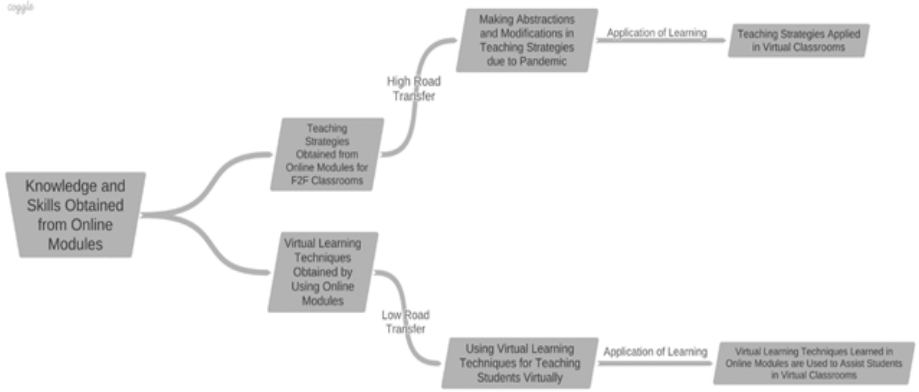

Figure 1. Conceptualizing Low and High Road Transfer of Learning

Transfer of Learning Theory

The transfer of learning theory lens offered insight into how individuals transfer learning from one context to another. Salomon and Perkins (1989) discussed two mechanisms, Low Road transfer and High Road transfer (1989). Low Road transfer occurs when individuals transfer learning between two similar contexts; it does not require much abstraction or modification from the learner. High Road transfer occurs when the learning context is different from the context in which the individual wants to apply it. This requires learners to make abstractions from and significant modifications to what they learned, so it is appropriate for the new context.

Our study utilized the theoretical assumptions from both the Low Road and High Road transfer mechanisms. Applying both was important as they were interrelated. Each perspective brought insight into the efficacy of Project MOOPIL VPD (Irby, 2015). We operated on the theoretical assumption that educators could transfer what they learned virtually in Project MOOPIL (Irby, 2015) to their virtual teaching spaces, demonstrating Low Road transfers. Although no one expected the sudden transition to

virtual learning environments due to COVID-19, the High Road transfer mechanism could be employed and help us understand how teachers transferred their learning of pedagogical practices initially designed for face-to-face classrooms to their new virtual classrooms.

The High Road interprets the abstractions teachers must perform to modify their learned pedagogical practices to fit in the new virtual learning environments for their students. The Low Road transfer is appropriate for interpreting how participants perceived the VMC content's transference to their physical classrooms and how they transferred their experiential learning from participating in virtual learning as students to their new responsibilities as online educators.

Adult Learning Theory

Adult learning theory asserts that adults are generally motivated to learn when they experience a need to do so. As adults learn, they have a new awareness of essential experiences. When they acknowledge the experience, they tend to appraise it and draw meaning and value from the encounter (Lindeman, 1926). Knowles (1975) expanded on this theory in his six characteristics of adult learners. The learner must first need to know something and recognize that need for learning. As the pandemic took over, teachers' need to reach their emergent English speakers was compounded by the need to learn how to engage them virtually, in line with how Knowles (1975) described the learner as self-directed.

Self-directed learning (SLD) is a well-recognized component of adult learning theory based on the premise that adults' interests determine their learning; therefore, they prefer to self-direct and assume responsibility for their learning (McCray, 2016). As teachers assume the responsibility for their learning, they are encouraged to reflect on the experiences throughout the modules. Teachers who engage in reflective learning "plan, monitor, and reflect upon their experiences" (McCray, 2016, p.52). Indeed, the teachers who participated in this study played a significant role in their own learning.

Literature Review

Virtual Professional Development

Across the literature, there has been increased interest in virtual professional development as it provides authentic and relevant training that works to enrich the overall teaching environment (Gosselin et al., 2016). Online professional development offers lucrative learning because of its flexibility and easy access to information (Gosselin et al., 2016; Zimmer & Matthews, 2022). Through online professional development, teachers are provided with professional development resources to which they would otherwise not have access (Carpenter & Munshower, 2020). Online

professional development facilitates the exchange of ideas and encourages collaboration between professionals (Callahan, 2017).

Professional development for teachers has been at the forefront of "efforts designed to increase teaching practice and students' learning" (Balta & Eryılmaz, 2019, p.588). While there is no *one size fits all* approach to supporting teachers' professional learning throughout their teaching careers (Campbell, 2017), mentoring is one standard method of professional development support.

Virtual Mentoring and Coaching

Historically, mentoring has taken place face-to-face, but with the onset and emphasis of technology in our daily lives, mentoring is shifting to also occur in virtual realms. Online mentoring is a convenient method for receiving input about ones' practice and can help support pre-service and novice teachers as they develop their identities as educators (Briscoe, 2019; Butler et al., 2013; Dorner & Kumar, 2017; Reali et al., 2020; Redmond, 2015). Mentoring plays an integral role in the development of teacher efficacy; "these types of mentorships can meaningfully enhance teachers' professional knowledge and support their sense of well-being in ways that would otherwise be difficult to achieve from textbooks or their peers" (Briscoe, 2019, p. 242). Redmond (2015) described the benefits and opportunities provided by online mentoring as:

- Enhanced access to mentoring opportunities because participants are not bounded by geographical constraints;
- Convenient access as most people now have their communication device in their pocket/handbag in the form of a smartphone;
- Reduced costs in time and money, no travel required or time away from job;
- A written record of interactions to be viewed/reviewed over time;
- Flexible access at a time convenient to participants and minimizing disruption to their daily commitments;
- Reduced impact of status in the mentoring relationship, less threatening, anonymity encourages the mentee to ask questions not likely to ask in person;
- Decreased pressure of an immediate response, asynchronous interactions provide time for the response to be more reflective;
- Enhanced opportunity for mentees to take responsibility for initiating contact and to play an active role in the discussion;
- Improved benefits to those skilled written communicators or those who are shy in person; and

- Increased awareness of issues of privacy and confidentiality when online. (p. 96)

Indeed, with the use of online meeting platforms such as Zoom, Go to Meeting, and Microsoft Teams during the pandemic, it seems that mentoring online has become somewhat more manageable over the last year. Teachers who were not familiar with online platforms were quickly introduced to Zoom and other online meeting formats at the beginning of the pandemic to teach their students virtually. Teachers initially seemed to have difficulties with the suddenness in which they were thrust into the virtual world (Etchells et al.., 2021). However, educators soon recovered, using the tools with their online students more and more effectively. This outcome, in turn, led to their acceptance and continued use of the technology throughout the pandemic. This acceptance of the online format translated to teachers participating in online professional development through Project MOOPIL and participating in the VMC. Irby et al. (2020) indicated that during the time of the pandemic,

> (a) the mentors must continue communications and supports – this may be in small groups or individually, (b) the teachers need emotional support from their mentors during this time, and the VMCs must remember that this is about the person – as the priority. That action represents what a 'mentor' is, (c) The secondary part of this VMC is about coaching with a leading question such as 'How can we help you to support what the District/Campus is requiring? (p.1)

VPLCs, VPDs, and VMCs have become favorable methods for supporting teachers and their students with technology development (Lynch et al., 2021; Irby et al., 2017). Online mentoring provides decreased pressure, convenient access, and enriched opportunities for open and supportive relationships and friendships across space and time boundaries (Redmond, 2015).

Virtual Learning

Virtual learning can range from learning environments where individuals work primarily independently, experiencing little or no interaction with an instructor or other learners, to courses where students are highly engaged in interactive learning with the instructor and peers (Dabbagh et al., 2019). Online education has increased dramatically over the past ten years, and we continue to see a growing diversity among online learning students (Beasley & Beck, 2017). As a result, there is a continued need to meet the distinct needs of diverse learners in online settings; similarly,

teachers and educators are called to honor these needs in a traditional face-to-face format (Beasley & Beck, 2017).

With the expansion of online learning, the investigation of its quality and its effectiveness has surfaced as a significant area of study and concern (Zhang & Lin, 2020). For example, in online learning environments, there may be fewer opportunities to interact with teachers and peers (Zhang & Lin, 2020). Because of this, curriculum designers must create ample opportunities for students to engage with teachers, classmates, and the learning content. These practices also improve student motivation (Zhang & Lin, 2020).

There is a boom in the relevancy of online professional development as it provides authentic and responsive training that works to enrich the overall teaching environment (Gosselin et al., 2016; Zimmer & Matthews, 2022). Its flexible nature and the ease with which teachers can access the information has led to a lucrative approach to professional development (Gosselin et al., 2016). Through VPD, teachers are provided with professional development resources to which they may not otherwise not have access (Carpenter & Munshower, 2020). VPD is a productive way to facilitate professional development practices because it supports the exchange of ideas and encourages collaboration between professionals without sitting side by side (Callahan, 2017; Zimmer & Matthews, 2022).

Virtual communication has become the norm in everyday life (Owen et al., 2018). Bringing professional development into the virtual sphere has aided the increased use of synchronous tools such as webinars and video conferencing, through which professionals can communicate in real-time. Similarly, it has also increased the use of asynchronous platforms like email and discussion forums that allow professionals to utilize professional development when most convenient for them (Butler et al., 2013; Owen, 2016). Virtual realm development has also contributed to increased exposure to diverse ways of thinking, subsequently expanding previous ways of knowing. Technology increased educators' ability to interact and form relationships with other professionals who may have views and cultural backgrounds different from their own (Owen et al., 2018). In addition to broadening belief systems, VPD can also bring teachers with similar goals and needs together (Carpenter & Munshower, 2020). VPD is helpful as it inspires creative thinking and collaboration. It is also beneficial for teachers who work in rural districts that may lack teams of educators teaching similar subjects with similar goals and needs, with whom they can converse (Carpenter & Munshower, 2020).

Methodology

We applied a mixed method research approach (Creswell, 2012). In this mixed method research, we used an equal status qualitative-quantitative

design (Johnson & Onwuegbuzie, 2004). Data were gathered from a closed- and open-ended survey with a follow up interview. Both the quantitative and qualitative phase findings are integrated into the interpretation of the findings.

Participants

The Project MOOPIL team members sent emails to teachers in our partner school districts to invite them to participate in this study. A total of 145 teachers expressed interest in the study. Of the 145 individuals who expressed interest, 50 were randomly selected through the random selection tool in Excel to participate in this study.

The virtual nature of this study elicited a diverse group of participants. Initially, the participants included 15 Hispanic, 13 African American, and 22 White teachers. Ultimately, 38 teachers completed the study. Of the 38 educators who finished, eight were male, and 30 were female. They taught various communities across Texas in elementary and secondary grade-levels in a range of subjects, including English as a second language (ESL), English, Mathematics, Science, Social Studies, Music, and Physical Education.

Data Collection

We collected the data in this study through surveys and interviews. A survey was sent out to the 38 participants, and we received 28 responses. The survey included questions about how likely participants were to incorporate and share MOOPIL modules in their own school PLCs, how they have specifically used the material in the online modules to virtually work with ELs, and how their approach to teaching has shifted due to not being in the classroom because of the COVID-19 pandemic.

During the last group meeting, coaches inquired whether participants were interested in volunteering for a 15-30-minute interview. Participants were interviewed on how Project MOOPIL content and practices had impacted their teaching approach and how they adjusted to teaching during COVID-19. Participants were informed that involvement in the interview was additional and voluntary and was not a requirement to complete Project MOOPIL. Six of the 38 participants volunteered to be interviewed. All participants were aware of this research and consented for their information to be use.

Interview Protocol and Survey

The survey consisted of five three-point Likert scale questions and 12 short answer questions. We used the survey to gather initial demographic information about our participants and information about teacher experiences

with VPD and in their virtual mentoring cohorts during the pandemic. The survey questions included such items as: how engaged the participants were in the discussions, to what extent did the mentor guide and facilitate the sessions, and how likely the participants were to use the online modules in their own professional learning communities. The survey was reviewed for its face validity by three experts in VMC and VPD. Feedback was provided and the survey was altered slightly for clarity.

We interviewed six participants about their perceptions of Project MOOPIL changing their pedagogical practices as they moved from face-to-face to online teaching during the initiation of the COVID-19 pandemic. Interviewers asked participants the following four questions a) how have you as a teacher used Project MOOPIL material for English learners in your virtual spaces during this time; (b) in what ways has your approach to teaching shifted while you are not in the classroom with your students; (c) how has Project MOOPIL impacted your virtual teaching experience; and, (d) how have you been coping and adapting to teaching from home. The various themes and codes that emerged from participants in answering these questions are discussed in the findings and discussion section.

Data Analysis

We prompted teachers through surveys and interviews on their experiences in Project MOOPIL during the COVID-19 pandemic. Because this was an equal status mixed method approach, we report and interpret together the quantitative and qualitative data as relevant. Of the 28 teachers who responded to the survey, 85% said that they were "very engaged" in the discussions with their virtual mentors and 85.7 % were extremely likely to use the VPD with their own professional learning communities. In addition, 96% of the participants indicated that the discussion of the modules was detailed or very detailed and 64% of the participants said that the mentors contributed "to a large" extent in guiding them, while 35.71% said that the mentors aided the discussions "somewhat."

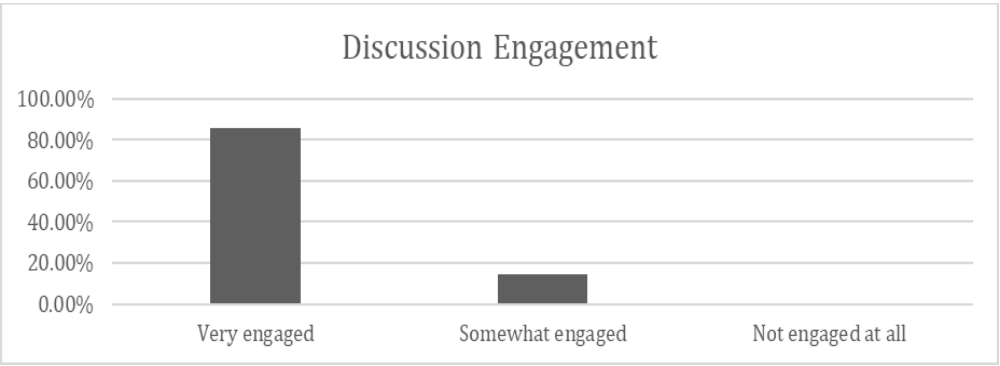

Figure 2. Participant Engagement in Discussions

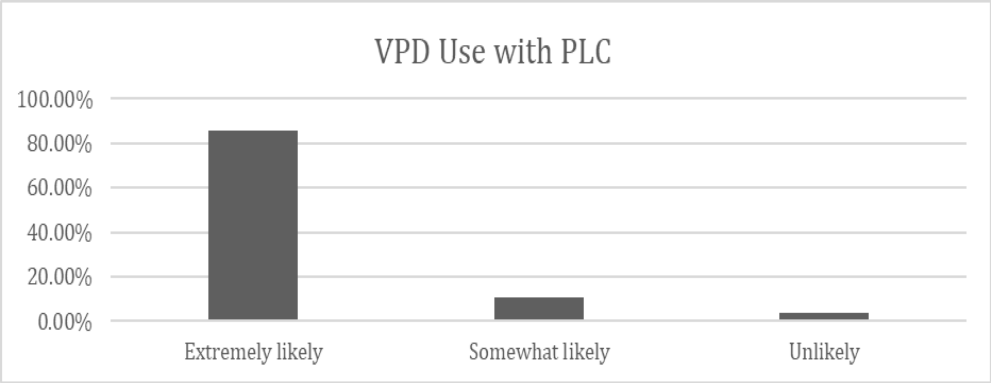

Figure 3. Use of VPD with PLCS

Qualitative Analysis

We processed data through inductive content analysis (Creswell, 2012). We developed a categorical framework for the content analysis from the questions asked in our survey and interviews related to (a) online module VMC PLC impact, (b) COVID impact/ teaching shift, and (c) online module in Virtual Spaces. All participant interviews were transcribed and reduced down to units. Units for analysis were statements, phrases, or keywords. We sorted units from interviews to determine rich and recurring themes among participant experiences.

We identified three main themes with sub-themes from their responses related to (a) Project MOOPIL's perceived impact on participant virtual teaching experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic; (b) the shift which took place due to the unprecedented circumstances; and (c) ways educators transferred learned content originally designed for traditional educational settings for ELs to their new virtual spaces. All teacher participants reported a methodological shift of some kind in their approach to teaching due to the change to virtual learning platforms, participation in Project MOOPIL, or a combination of the two.

Trustworthiness and Credibility of the Quantitative and Qualitative Components of the Study

To enhance the study's trustworthiness and credibility, the survey was validated by three experts in VMC and VPD. Feedback was provided and the survey was altered slightly for clarity. For the qualitative component, we used member-checks with participant responses during interviews to ensure we understood them accurately. Additionally, we engaged in reflexive practices to acknowledge biases during data collection and analysis, journaling independently and reflecting on the research team aloud. We combed through data and determined themes as individuals initially and then met as a team to analyze data a second time, resorting

together, resolving any inconsistencies, and strengthening reliability among the research team. Finally, we used triangulation from participant responses to the questions in interviews and surveys to enhance trustworthiness (Creswell & Poth, 2017; Creswell, 2007; Ely et al., 1991; Erlandson et al., 1993; Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Considerations

While we were able to recruit an ethnically, experientially, and regionally diverse group of teachers from rural, urban, and suburban school districts across Texas, our sample of participants evolved as this study progressed. We started the study with 50 educators. But, as the COVID-19 pandemic spread throughout Texas and the United States, teachers' burden in adjusting to the need for online teaching became clear. Many participants became disheartened with the amount of extra work and time they had to put in for students and parents. Some began missing meetings, and several participants dropped out completely, citing overwhelming responsibilities and stress. This may have impacted the sample of our participants and the findings we recorded.

Other constraints included technology use and internet connectivity. Several teachers had issues being disconnected from the video conferences due to unreliable internet service. While many of the participants were able to rejoin, participants dropping out of the online meeting and logging back on repeatedly became an issue. Several participants did not use their cameras during sessions because the computers supplied by their schools did not include cameras. In contrast, several others used their cellular devices to connect with meetings. Participants in the study may have had interruptions to accessing content, mentoring and coaching, and their peers.

In addition to technological challenges, motivation to complete the courses and an inability to film teaching demonstrations became an issue toward the end of the study. More teachers began to drop off in late April as school district demands on participating teachers increased. With the added workload, some teachers decided to sever their commitment to Project MOOPIL entirely. Furthermore, teachers could not film themselves using the strategies they had learned in the online modules as classes were no longer being held in schools. Because of this, our findings are perceptions of teacher experiences rather than observations.

Results and Discussion

As discussed in the theoretical framework, we utilized adult learning theory (Baumgartner, 2003; Knowles, 2015) and transfer of learning theory (Perkins & Salomon, 1992; Salomon & Perkins, 1989) in this study. Teachers in the study were initially motivated to participate in the VPD

because of their need to provide in-class support for their ELs and assumed responsibility for their learning. With this learning, participants also uncovered online strategies by participating in the PD that would help them teach their own students online. After completing the PD modulus, participants began to reflect (Jarvis, 2001) on what they learned in the PD and expressed their thoughts with the mentors.

Impact on Participants

Participants reported various ways in which Project MOOPIL impacted their experiences as educators. Teachers' personal experiences in online learning through Project MOOPIL provided insight into what their students immersed in online education might be experiencing as well. They also reported that their enrollment in the project led to an enhanced awareness of EL needs and strategies to meet them. Finally, we found that VMC and participant engagement in PLCs cultivated a valuable sense of community support.

Experience in Online Learning

When school administrators were confronted with COVID-19, they were required to make decisions regarding their institutions' operation. As Texas schools eventually closed, many transitioned learning to other distance learning pathways. While not all instruction went from the physical classroom to online, many Project MOOPIL participants reported this change in their schools. While some participants reported having engaged in online learning before their involvement in Project MOOPIL, some participants had not experienced online learning until their participation in Project MOOPIL. Among both groups, participants whose teaching was moved to online platforms shared that their experience in Project MOOPIL's virtual format offered a deeper understanding of what their students might be experiencing as they learned virtually.

The learning curve to navigating new and unfamiliar online learning spaces is often steep. Through Project MOOPIL, educators had recent experience as virtual students themselves. They were able to recall the challenges they faced as students and anticipate their students' needs in this regard. Furthermore, participant experience in Project MOOPIL gave them a foundational understanding of how to navigate online learning platforms while also emphasizing the value of patience as their students became familiar with new technology, demonstrating a Low Road transference (Salomon & Perkins, 1989). One educator said, "Without having tried to learn online, I would have been underprepared for this experience." Another stated, "It definitely has made me more sympathetic to my students as they

navigate learning online." Another educator echoed, "this has helped me to see things from the student's point of view."

Finally, their online professional development experience through Project MOOPIL helped teachers develop an appreciation for accessibility. During a difficult time when people were separated from one another to keep them safe and healthy, Project MOOPIL was already formatted to serve them in an accessible way. Some participants recognized this convenience and accessibility; one stated, "It is innovative. It shows how PD can work in the future. It allows for distance and proximity to no longer be limitations for teacher development," which demonstrates Knowles (2015) and Baumgartner et al. (2003) theories that adults are motivated to learn when they experience a need to do so.

Awareness of EL Need and Strategies

One of the most consistently reported themes in this study was how participation in Project MOOPIL ignited teacher awareness of EL student needs and provided them with a cornucopia of high-impact strategies to meet such requirements. One educator wrote, "I am more mindful of English learners and strategies that support language development." Another said, "these modules made me more aware of the student needs and how I have to make it a point to meet them. This has been an eye-opening experience." We go into more depth about the strategies they drew from in a later section.

Participation in Project MOOPIL led educators to place EL learning at the forefront of their planning and teaching. One participant said, "It has helped keep the needs of my students in mind when creating assignments." Teacher involvement heightened an awareness of EL needs that otherwise may not have been present in virtual teaching approaches had there been a global pandemic before they participated in Project MOOPIL. One teacher reflected, "I think I have been more intentional with different assignments because I've been thinking about ways to incorporate as many supports as I can since I can't physically give them everything in the classroom." While some strategies may have been taken for granted in a physical space prior to COVID-19, they were subsequently more intentionally employed in the virtual arena. One participant suggested that participation in Project MOOPIL "will affect my entire approach, not just virtual teaching but in the classroom as well. Mainly, the knowledge and awareness gained will constantly be in planning lessons and assignments/assessments."

While educators transferred new strategies to support ELs, they were also conscious of the hurdles their non-ELs faced as learning moved out of the physical classroom. One tenet of Project MOOPIL and EL education is that the teaching strategies that serve ELs in the classroom also enhance the

learning experience of non-ELs. This premise was also frequently recognized by participants; one teacher supported this claim stating "the strategies that work well for ELL students are good for all students as well." Participants shared an understanding that their approaches to teaching EL students were also beneficial for non-ELs. Teachers reported the wherewithal to serve all students sensitively, regardless of English fluency. One teacher said, "I feel like I have to assume that all students need all of the extra supports and resources because I am not there to monitor their comprehension and growth." Project MOOPIL participants not only received content knowledge by completing online learning modules, they also benefited from engaging with their virtual learning community cohort and virtual mentoring and coaching. We found that while the educational landscape rapidly shifted, participants found solace among their peers and mentors in Project MOOPIL. One educator explained, "My PLC was extremely helpful and supportive by sharing with the group what they were going through to help build a common experience". Another teacher participant echoed the reciprocal notion of community, citing their willingness to help others.

COVID-19 and a Teaching Shift

As state, district, and school leaders acknowledged the crises associated with COVID-19, they began to make concessions in the traditional approaches to student learning in the United States. Participants in our study reflected on the shift from traditional practices and its impact on their experience as educators. They cited many struggles and, from those, some participants developed creative strategies and new outlooks to adjust to a new way of life. Loss of autonomy, lack of technology access, and student fallout were among the obstacles they described.

Student Fallout

Perhaps the most significant hurdle educators encountered was the challenge of engaging their students. Teachers struggled with a lack of student engagement, whether it was completing workbooks sent home or participation in virtual learning spaces. One educator reported an inability to reflect on how they adjusted to the new online learning environment "because students don't attend the hangout." We discussed the role parental presence played in student engagement in another section. Technology and access to resources was also reportedly responsible.

Technology

For many educators, their transition to remote learning was coupled with technological additions. This new factor became foundational to many learning spaces and contributed to a disconnect between teacher and student.

One teacher called attention to the inequities that can contribute to opportunity gaps, stating, "I see the need for all students to have access to a device and internet to make an impact on learning." Another teacher highlighted the struggle when they stated, "The approach was somewhat difficult due to the fact that 50% of my students did not have devices or any internet." A teacher built on this notion when they responded, "Technology and an 'I can't do this' attitude became major hurdles."

Students were either unable to access the resources necessary to engage virtually (e.g. Computer devices, WIFI, etc.) or, if they did have access to the technology, they faced challenges learning how to log in correctly and click the right buttons. One teacher reflected, "I am more of a technical support person now. I have made more Google forms and spreadsheets in the past few months than in my entire ten years of teaching."

Lack of Autonomy

Though some teachers eventually mastered technological hiccups, they still faced struggles. Among the many challenges posed by COVID-19, the elimination of classes or the inability to control what teachers taught became apparent in several participants' statements. During the shift from in-person to distance learning, administrators faced critical and prompt responses. Some decided to streamline the process for all of their educators. Several of the educator participants reported a loss of agency over the content and how it was delivered. Some schools outsourced their curriculum development to external vendors or used existing online modules, while others delegated the task of creating virtual teaching resources to instructional coaches. These practices led to a loss of autonomy and input for some participants. When asked how Project MOOPIL content impacted their virtual teaching approach, one participant stated simply, "I am limited and not able to have much input."

Resilience and Creativity

Though educators were presented with numerous difficulties and setbacks in the Spring of 2020, they also demonstrated a sense of resiliency and creativity. Educators who faced new challenges from remote learning also encountered opportunities for creativity and resourcefulness in their approaches. One educator reported a sense of gratitude for this new system: "I feel like I am always working in small groups, so I am enjoying quite a bit of one-on-one or small group teaching. I am able to go into much more depth with some students and also reteach it a bit easier since I have a smaller number of students 'chatting' with me." Another teacher had a similarly optimistic mindset: "It has been a huge shift. I have basically gone from almost no online activity to 100% online. It has definitely been a challenge,

but I believe a lot of really good things will come from it in education as a whole."

Teachers demonstrated an ability to expand their approaches by using techniques they acquired in Project MOOPIL (described later in the study) and some of their resourcefulness. One educator shared an approach in which they addressed limitations: "I try to keep the students engaged through checking up on them by email and during office hours and phone calls." Another shared, "I have to use more strategies to ensure the information is understood. I am using more visuals and asking more questions, especially if they are quiet." Teachers made themselves available through various modes: "We communicate a lot through email, and when students have specific questions about a problem, I find myself explaining the material by email."

Parent Engagement

Lack of parent involvement is something many educators encounter whether they are experiencing a global pandemic or not. There are modules offered through Project MOOPIL which emphasize the role parents play in student learning. Participants also noted this role as their practices shifted from in -class to at-home learning. One educator described the way MOOPIL content impacted their virtual teaching approach, making them "...more aware of the importance of connecting to parents and sharing cultural differences so they can appreciate it too." Another participant cited their relationship with parents as a necessity that emerged from the challenges of virtual teaching, "It has been more difficult for us to reach out to our kids, and contact is mainly being made with or through parents." Though this example highlights the challenge to direct teacher/student contact, it also unveils the benefit of drawing in parental cooperation and a group approach to learning. Students may be negatively impacted when parents are unable to participate in their children's education, perhaps due to language barriers, economic constraints, or other obstacles. One educator acknowledged this struggle when they said, "I am striving to create lessons that will both extend thinking and be easy enough that the kids can guide themselves through independently because of lack of help at home."

Grace over Grades

Assessments and student outcomes often propel educational systems. When the pandemic hit, the educational system could no longer function in the same structure as it had previously existed, and educators were forced to adjust their perceptions about how classrooms should look. Study participants demonstrated an awareness of the potential impact a global pandemic and new remote learning approaches could have on their students' social and emotional wellbeing. One teacher said, "I think about how

students will respond to the content, and what else I can include that can help them not be anxious." Many participants reported a shift in their expectations once learning moved from the physical classroom to remote learning. "I have kept this mentality 'Grace over Grades' because, for many students, school is not a priority right now. Surviving is their main priority."

Conclusion

Project MOOPIL was intended to help educators who engage in VPD transfer module content to the work they do in traditional in-person learning spaces (Irby, 2015). Once COVID-19 forced schools to adapt their teaching and learning approaches to virtual spaces, educators faced a new frontier. Though the new format had the potential to complicate instruction and lead to further opportunity gaps for English learners, participants reported sensitivity to these students during that time. There was a heightened sense of awareness reported by one participant. "Since all of my time is online, I have had to work on being even more aware of my ELs during my instruction time. I do videos of content instruction so that students can watch more than once if needed." In this case, online instruction could enhance EL learning outcomes with the added ability to access and replay course content repeatedly.

In this study, we found many participants demonstrated High Road transfers by reportedly shifting the knowledge acquired in Project MOOPIL for students in physical classrooms and transferring it to their practices in the virtual realm. Educators reported that the information they learned in Project MOOPIL held a continued sense of applicability, regardless of the environment. One participant referred to content they learned in the modules as "idea nuggets...surrounding the various ways to engage students in conversation and through writing activities." Another said that during virtual teaching, "It [Project MOOPIL] has given me more suggestions and strategies to use when teaching and reviewing with my scholars." Participants demonstrated the ability to transfer high-impact strategies for English learners in the classroom to their new virtual learning spaces.

Implications

The global pandemic demanded that teachers rapidly adjust their approaches to instruction. Student success through distance learning is now more relevant than ever and, within that concept, it is critical to recognize that opportunity gaps exist for many students in U.S. classrooms. English learners and students experiencing economic disparity often do not have access to the same opportunities as other students who are not limited financially or linguistically (Carter & Welner, 2013). English learners may not have home computers or access to reliable wi-fi connections, making it

difficult for students to complete online lessons or log into online classes. Some scholars (Kuhfeld & Tarasawa, 2020) have expressed concerns fear that COVID-19 has further exacerbated this gap through the setbacks brought on by distance learning. Students' limited access to technology and the internet, parents juggling new responsibilities in the home, standardized approaches to teaching and learning, lack of student engagement, unmet expectations, and personal stressors from the pandemic have all been cited as hurdles to student achievement in 2020.

We found VPD effective in supporting educators' perceived efficacy and uncovered struggles educators experienced as they virtually tended to their own students' development, which was also addressed in VPD and VPLCs. Thus, it would be beneficial to examine the challenges participants described in this study. It would also be helpful for future researchers to study student experiences in virtual learning spaces to better understand what it is like for both emergent English speakers and native speakers in K-12 online learning spaces. When we understand students' virtual learning experiences, we can cater interventions to meet existing needs. We observed an example of such in this study when one teacher reported attaching videos to their lessons so English learners (and all their students for that matter) could view and reference them repeatedly. This was a scaffolding system uncommon in face-to-face learning environments. This ingenuity demonstrated the gains to be made when teachers consider the individual needs of all students, are strategic, and capitalize on unusual circumstances. As technological advances continue to develop and shape the educational landscape, researchers and educators must continue to evaluate ways to integrate them that enhance the experiences of historically marginalized students.

Teachers reported a shift in pathways for student success based on their participation in VPD and VPLC. Teachers in this study were cognizant of student anxiety and shared a desire to be flexible and gracious in an effort to ease it. They reported a change in expectations, the implementation of individualized student learning, and a balanced approach to time management. Expected outcomes were not standardized; instead, students were encouraged to do what they could in ways that were appropriate for them. Future researchers could study the adoption of this flexible approach to learning and examine what outcomes develop. We found the COVID-19 pandemic and subsequent move to virtual learning created opportunities for teachers to try new approaches, and some yielded favorable results.

Project MOOPIL was designed to support educator efficacy as they work with a substantial and growing population of ELs in U.S. schools. In this study, we found that measures Project MOOPIL provides to prepare effective educators of ELs, such as VMC, VPLCs, and the content offered

through VPD modules, are also valuable when student learning moves out of the classroom and into their homes. Teachers reported a successful transfer of learning in this experience into their new distance learning domains that not only catered to the needs of ELs in their classes but to native English speakers as well. Furthermore, through their participation in VPLCs and engagement in Project MOOPIL VMC, participants demonstrated the ability to access and benefit from virtual collaborative support, even when life became challenging.

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