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Teacher Education in the Time of COVID-19: Creating Digital Networks as University-School-Family Partnerships

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Teacher Education in the Time of COVID-19: Creating Digital Networks as University-School-Family Partnerships

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Abstract

As COVID-19 has suddenly transformed the landscape of learning in the United States, teachers are doing what they do best: figuring out how to effectively respond to support their students on their own. However, by creating digital networks that include university-school-family partnerships, the reach of teachers and teacher educators can increase. Teacher educators can provide support, systems, and strategies to maneuver the additional stressors and challenges posed by teaching during COVID-19. In this essay, we discuss how university-school-family partnerships mitigate the impacts of trauma, augment digital learning, and provide support for a variety of instructional scenarios happening in homes. Our focus on middle grade learners provides promise for meeting the needs of diverse students while capitalizing on the resources and expertise of universities, schools, teachers, and families.

"Our state superintendent announced today that school is online for the remainder of the year. How do I effectively teach in English, over GoogleMeet, when my children speak a second language as do their families?"

> *- Mrs. Curry, an English as a Second Language Teacher, grapples with her new reality, instructing emergent bilingual fifth grade children for at least 60 days online.*

"My district is mandating that I Zoom with 23 11-year-old children, in sixth grade, for three hours each day. I have spotty internet at home, many of my children do not have devices, and also have connectivity issues. I also have three children, who must be at home with me, under the age of five. The content matters, but so does acknowledging these children's situational trauma."

> *- Mrs. Russel laments as she formulates her distance learning plan in reaction to COVID-19 school cancellations.*

Introduction

These educators' perspectives provide a brief glimpse into the new reality of online education producing ripples of challenges within PK-12 schools and students' homes. In the current unprecedented times of uncertainty in which schooling has been transformed quickly and with little notice, teachers and school leaders are reaching out for guidance, support, and resources. The new educational landscape is populated with pedagogical shifts, and barriers to success may be augmented by teachers' or guardians' pre-existing identities about teaching using distance learning methods (Pape & Lopez-Aflitto, 2020). In the quick response to prepare for teaching in a COVID-19 world, teacher educators answered the call loudly, doing what they do best: figuring out how to effectively respond to support their students on their own. However, they do not have to continue to work alone.

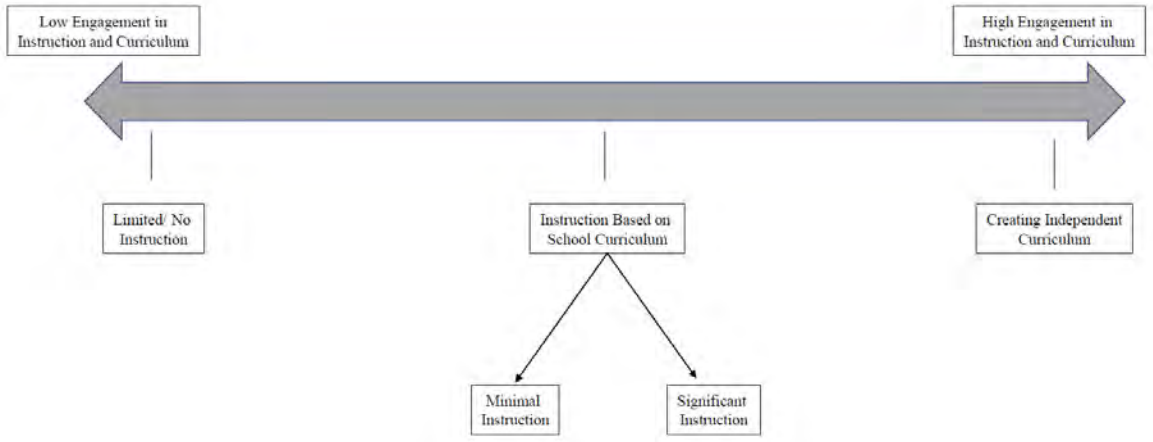
The purpose of the present essay is to detail the extraordinary effort and reaction of teacher educators in the time of COVID-19 which have centered on developing meaningful networks of support to intersect the talents and expertise of university personnel, school personnel, and family units. Teacher educators have shown their expertise and have willingly lent their support to local, state, regional, and national partners. The ultimate goal of these university-school-family partnerships has been to help educational stakeholders adjust quickly and to provide high quality instruction to all students, regardless of technological access. The beauty in this creation is that it is something that can transcend COVID-19. The doors these partnerships and networks have opened may transform how we think about teaching and instruction by shifting into a new domain – the digital age of university-school partnerships with an emphasis on trauma-informed and social emotional learning (SEL) supports (Reich et al., 2020; Thomas et al., 2019).

Continuum of Instruction Occurring During COVID-19

As of March 25, 2020, approximately 55 million school-aged children in the US are now receiving educational instruction in a home-based setting (Butcher, 2020). Prior to this date, about one million U.S. children participated in virtual schooling (Butcher). With this drastic change, one concern for university-school-family partnerships is to meet the needs of every learner, regardless of what types of instruction they may be experiencing away from the typical school environment. Teacher educators recognize that different levels of support and instruction are occurring in homes across the US, based on a variety of factors (Kesson, 2020). Yet, resources need to be provided to students, and the university-school-family partnerships must adapt to provide assistance and support (see Figure 1).

Figure 1

Continuum of Instruction Types in Distance Learning



Limited/ No Instruction

In a 2020 survey, 40% of teachers reported student access to books as a barrier to instruction (International Literacy Association, 2020), indicating that many households still may not have ready access to print-based education materials. About 95% of households with incomes over $75,000 reported having broadband access, while only 62-75% of households with incomes less than $35,000 have access to broadband (National Telecommunications and Information Administration, 2018). In addition to physical resources, adults in the household may be essential workers during COVID-19, managing multiple children under the age of 18, working extensive hours from home, or have limited access to Wifi or other resources that make distance learning possible. As of May 6, 2020, about 15% of adults were not able to work remotely and were not actively working, which can result in additional stress or trauma on the household and its inhabitants. Specifically, about 21% of adults are currently working outside the home during COVID-19 with another 20% working remotely (Duffin, 2020). These findings indicate that during the quick shift to distance learning, some households may not have adequate resources to provide instruction online or offline.

In a limited instruction scenario, students may be participating in completing some physical educational work provided by the school or may be infrequently joining online classes. In other instances, students may be overly distracted by external factors during instructional time, and some households may be forgoing instruction.

Instruction Based on Resources Provided by the School System

When schools shifted to distance learning, they provided resources for distance learning in digital spaces as well as in traditional formats by

sending pre-prepared work home with students. Within some households, these resources are the basis for instruction. Much of this instruction is largely based on reviewing content and trouble-shooting connectivity issues, rather than presenting new content or enrichment (Herold & Kurtz, 2020; Tate, 2020).

Minimal

In the minimal cases, learners are working through materials provided by schools, but may not be engaging to the full extent they did pre-COVID-19. In a recent survey (Herold & Kurtz, 2020), teachers reported an approximate 60% decline in student engagement during pandemic distance instruction, and those declines are increasing the longer online teaching persists. Additionally, teachers are reporting about one-fourth of their students as truant, or not engaging at all in instruction (Herold & Kurtz). This approach may be informed by some of the barriers outlined earlier (e.g., adults as essential workers, multiple children), or may be a result of needing the in-person instruction provided by teachers in traditional school settings and responding to trauma caused by COVID-19.

Significant

During this time, it is especially difficult to quantify to what degree students are engaging with content, as only about 44% of schools are monitoring student progress (Hill, 2020). However, it stands to reason that if some students are not participating fully in online instruction, others are. Using resources provided by the school, some households may be engaging in a significant level of instruction. For these households, they are using the materials and curriculum provided by the school system, in digital formats or by completing work sent home or both. Learners in this group are likely completing the majority of assignments and participating in instruction as often as they can.

Creation of Instruction Based on Outside Resources

Finally, we acknowledge that some households are taking the current situation as an opportunity to create their own curriculum based largely on outside resources. In a recent National Public Radio segment, parents detail these plans to include digital apps, outdoor projects such as gardening, and other resources to enhance the child's interests and the parents' goals for their child's education (National Public Radio Morning Edition, 2020). In other instances, the learners may be highly motivated to learn about specific information, creating their own passion projects. These households may either participate in none, some, or all of the curriculum provided by the school, but augment with their own materials, resources, and curriculum.

In the following sections, we detail how university-school-family partnerships are supporting learners across the continuum of instruction. Specifically, we address how these partnerships can create digital networks of support to mitigate the impacts of trauma and enhance digital learning through social media during COVID-19.

Trauma-Informed Instruction in the Middle Grades: Universities Supporting Schools and Families

While university-school-family partnerships consider the types of instruction learners are receiving, they cannot ignore the impacts of trauma on middle grade learners. During COVID-19, families are facing lack of socialization, technology equity barriers, digital citizenship/online safety concerns, internet capacity issues, unemployment, loss of family members, food shortages, essential employment, and other concerns, contributing to toxic stress and trauma in students' environments (Baker et al., 2020). Trauma is an emotional response to a traumatic event (American Psychological Association, 2020). Middle grade students are experiencing trauma in the form of: (1) upheaval to their daily lives; (2) grappling with or struggling to comprehend that their 'world' will not return to normal in the near future; and (3) responding to the havoc upon 'normal' societal functions. The effects can pervasively alter adolescents' mental health and emotional stability, including academic outcomes (The National Child Traumatic Stress Network, 2017). Not only are middle grade students experiencing trauma, but educators are not immune to experiencing traumatic stress. University-school-family partnerships can respond to these legitimate psychiatric and mental needs by providing evidenced-based, trauma-informed social-emotional (SEL) supports for both the adults and the young adults in K-12 school settings (CASEL, 2020; Miller, 2020).

Social and emotional learning (SEL) is a broad set of skills schools use with adults and student learners to alter behavior, improve brain function, and cognition (Rimm-Kaufman & Hulleman, 2015). In the current time, it can be challenging to foster social support systems, and those supports are critical to the needs of middle grade learners. University-school-family partnerships may provide an avenue to fill this void bridging complex school contexts with at-home instruction (CASEL, 2020; Chafouleas et al., 2016). During COVID-19, middle grade learners are devoid of face to face social interactions which provide the central foci of 'social emotional development' theoretical frameworks (CASEL). The middle grades are a unique time in which learners are grappling with physical, emotional, and social changes while trying to progress academically. Specifically, the middle grades are marked by exponential growth in the complexity of thinking that is required of students academically, while their brains are undergoing significant mental and biological changes.

While trauma is a byproduct of COVID-19, creating digital networks of support through partnerships between teacher educators and educational stakeholders can lessen some outcomes of trauma. If digital networks embed proven SEL components, university-school-family partnerships may buffer situational trauma and mitigate harmful, persistent negative effects. National health experts recommend that adolescent students and families find healthy ways to cope during COVID-19 shutdowns (American Academy of Pediatrics, 2020). Digital networks disseminating SEL practices and webinars, for example, from the university level to schools and families deliver the coping mechanisms that ordinarily may not reach adolescents (American Institute for Research, 2016; Reich et al., 2020). University-school-family partnerships can provide trauma-informed resources (as identified in Table 1), along with potential access to other resources. For instance, some universities are offering hotspots for Wifi access, in which families can park around campus and access online sources (University of Alabama-Birmingham, 2020). We describe trauma-informed, social emotional learning strategies for digital networks below in Table 1.

Table 1

Trauma-Informed Social Emotional Learning Strategies for Digital Networks

Trauma-Related	SEL: COVID-19 Response	School-Family
Secondary Trauma: https://traumaawareschools.org/secondarystress	CASEL: Distance Learning PD https://selproviders.casel.org/sel-resources/	SEL/Trauma Responses for Families https://developingchild.harvard.edu/resources/covid-19-resources/
Self-Care for Educators: https://safesupportivelearning.ed.gov/sites/default/files/Building_TSS_Handout_3secondary_trauma.pdf	CASEL SEL Signature Practices: https://schoolguide.casel.org/uploads/2018/12/CASEL_SEL-3-Signature-Practices-Playbook-V3.pdf	American Institutes for Research Supportive Schooling at Home: https://www.air.org/resource/building-positive-conditions-learning-home-strategies-and-resources-families-and-caregivers

Note: Adapted from Thomas, Crowsby, Vanderharr, 2019 p. 427, CASEL, 2020, and Riech, 2020

Trauma-Informed Practices through Digital Networks of Support

University-school-family partnerships are creating collaborative networks via social media and web-based platforms to curate and disseminate pre-existing materials, videos, resources, and websites for teachers' access. For example, a team of state-wide higher education and PK-12 professionals met weekly prior to the official closure of physical school buildings. This collaborative group created a central website entitled Alabama Colleagues Offering Resources for Educators (ACORE) intended for PK-12 teachers. The group has curated, evaluated, and posted hundreds of high-quality resources. ACORE also offers: contact lists of free educational consultants to support with transitioning to online learning, digital pedagogy design resources, platform tutorials (such as Screencastify, Panapto, MicrosoftTeams, and Zoom), and grade level specific resources, among other content specific resources.

Teacher educators have also created social network groups to support families during this traumatic time. For example, Parenting During a Pandemic (PDP) is a private Facebook group open to all families nationally and internationally with approximately 5,000 members. PDP provides families a forum to ask questions, view free resources, network, and problem solve to best support their families' needs. Both ACORE and PDP provide critical linkages as educational communities collaborate to face COVID-19.

Social Media as a Platform for Creating and Sustaining University-School-Family Partnerships

Given the realization that students differ in their access to digital resources (Figure 1) and teachers differ in their confidence to use digital literacies, social media platforms may be a digital tool that most individuals find familiar. Teachers find themselves in uncharted territory, and teachers may not readily have multiple months of online teaching materials prepared, particularly to support students who are relying on digital materials from schools for instruction. There are multiple hurdles to overcome including lack of time, resources, or training for these expectations and using digital literacies. Digital literacies are mediums of communication that include some aspect of online, visual, or kinesthetic literacy (e.g., online text, videos, images, or gestures, among others) (Castek & Mandarion, 2017; Leu et al., 2014). In the current times, digital literacy has shifted in mere minutes from being "optional, better practice" to "mandatory" practice. For students with many resources, digital literacy will now include reading texts online, watching videos, participating in live class sessions, and creating assignments. For students with fewer resources, digital literacy will include relying on authentic learning through new mechanisms.

University-school-family partnerships may be able to thrive using social media platforms to share digital resources. Teacher identities surrounding online or distance teaching may range from those who feel highly competent and comfortable with their skills to those who feel less comfortable (Kim et al., 2013). Teachers and families who consider themselves lacking in knowledge of technology, are often very well-versed in the social media world. In 2012, 90% of 13-17-year-olds reported the use of social media in some form, and about 70% of adults claimed to use at least one type of social media with about half of those reporting the use of more than one platform (National Association of School Psychologists, 2016). Additionally, 67% of Americans use a form of social media as a newsgathering source (Lagarde & Hudgins, 2018). Likely, in 2020, these percentages are higher as social media has continued to rise in popularity.

Educators had already begun incorporating the use of apps and social media platforms into instruction as an attempt to maximize student engagement prior to nationwide school closures (Lagarde & Hudgins, 2018; Sheninger, 2016). Social media platforms serve as a tool for potentially easing stress and trauma among educators during times such as the pandemic. Teacher educators can use these platforms as a vehicle for providing educators, parents, and families with tools and resources in a non-threatening, easily accessible format. We describe some benefits and limitations of using social media as a source to share educational information in Table 2.

Table 2

Benefits and Limitations of Social Media Source Dissemination

Benefits	Limitations
Social media is widely utilized and accessible:	*Membership in social media groups must be monitored in order to:*
·to reach large numbers of people quickly	·avoid "fake news" from being disseminated by members
·for educators and other entities from across the globe, which broadens the accessibility of expertise among many with common concerns and interests.	· prevent those with ill-intent from joining the group as a gateway to gather information for undesired purposes
·for parents and educators reluctant to ask for help, joining a social media group may be less intimidating than asking for assistance or admitting deficiencies in their ability to use technology	·vet content for accuracy and usefulness, in order to avoid resources lacking in quality and innovation from being misconstrued as best practice
	· constantly update content, or relevant content can become lost in the newsfeed as more and more information is added

Using Digital Tools to Create Professional Learning Communities and to Maintain University/School Partnerships

In the months since the first stay-at-home orders were announced, teacher educators have reimagined the vision for university-school partnerships, which are crucial to teacher development (Darling-Hammond, 2014), and they have created digital lessons, developed individual videos and video series of content, and prepared new databases full of information for teachers and parents to utilize. Because teacher educators are charged with preparing preservice teachers for their future classrooms, while attempting to meet the needs of inservice teachers and families who are navigating the waters of this new online instructional reality, opportunities for digital professional learning communities (PLCs) are possible. The basis of successful PLCs relies on the fact that teaching is constantly changing, and educators are constantly challenged to examine and re-examine the pedagogical approaches that best satisfy the needs and demands of those whom they are charged to teach (Roberts & Pruitt, 2003).

One example of a digital PLC is a Facebook group called Digital Learning 101.This group, created by teacher educators, provides a space for preservice teachers to practice lesson planning and teaching in a video-based format while preparing resources for inservice teachers and families to utilize in supplementing their instruction. These lessons, submitted to the Facebook group and geared toward middle grade students, serve as resources for inservice teachers and families who are seeking ways to satisfy curricular demands. The teachers, as well as others, collaborate to share resources. Thus, an online PLC has emerged out of a Facebook group.

Another use of digital platforms to sustain university-school-family partnerships is the use of interactive meeting tools, such as Zoom, Skype, GoogleMeet or Microsoft Teams. One example of using these tools to foster collaborations comes from one teacher educator

who digitized her university-school partnership. Prior to COVID-19, this partnership included on-site coaching and pairing preservice and inservice teachers to collaborate within classrooms. Post-COVID-19, this collaboration moved online with preservice teachers continuing to support their assigned inservice teacher by preparing materials, curating resources, and providing tutoring to students using online meeting tools. University-school-family partnerships should be mutually beneficial to all stakeholders (Darling-Hammond, 2014; Roberts & Pruitt, 2003). Additionally, teachers and administrators in the school host virtual Zoom sessions for preservice teachers, providing them with information on topics such as: job searches, interviews, maintaining high expectations, the impact of the pandemic on their school and students, what to expect the first year of teaching, etc. This PLC has morphed to meet the challenges of COVID-19 and university and school members have expressed a desire to continue it in the future.

Implications and Conclusion

While it can be easy to focus on the negative consequences COVID-19 is likely to have on education, our goal is to focus on one big positive during this time: strengthening university-school-family partnerships. Teacher educators can work individually with families to provide offline and online resources such as those provided by ACORE, Parenting During a Pandemic, and Digital Learning 101. The resources provided through university-school-family partnerships may supplement the instruction students are receiving in homes, while mitigating the impacts of trauma associated with the loss of their social networks, stress related to not being at school, lack of nutrition from not receiving school meals, among others. Through the examples we have shared, we hope others find support, guidance, and a helpful hand in providing high quality instruction for their middle grade learners.

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