

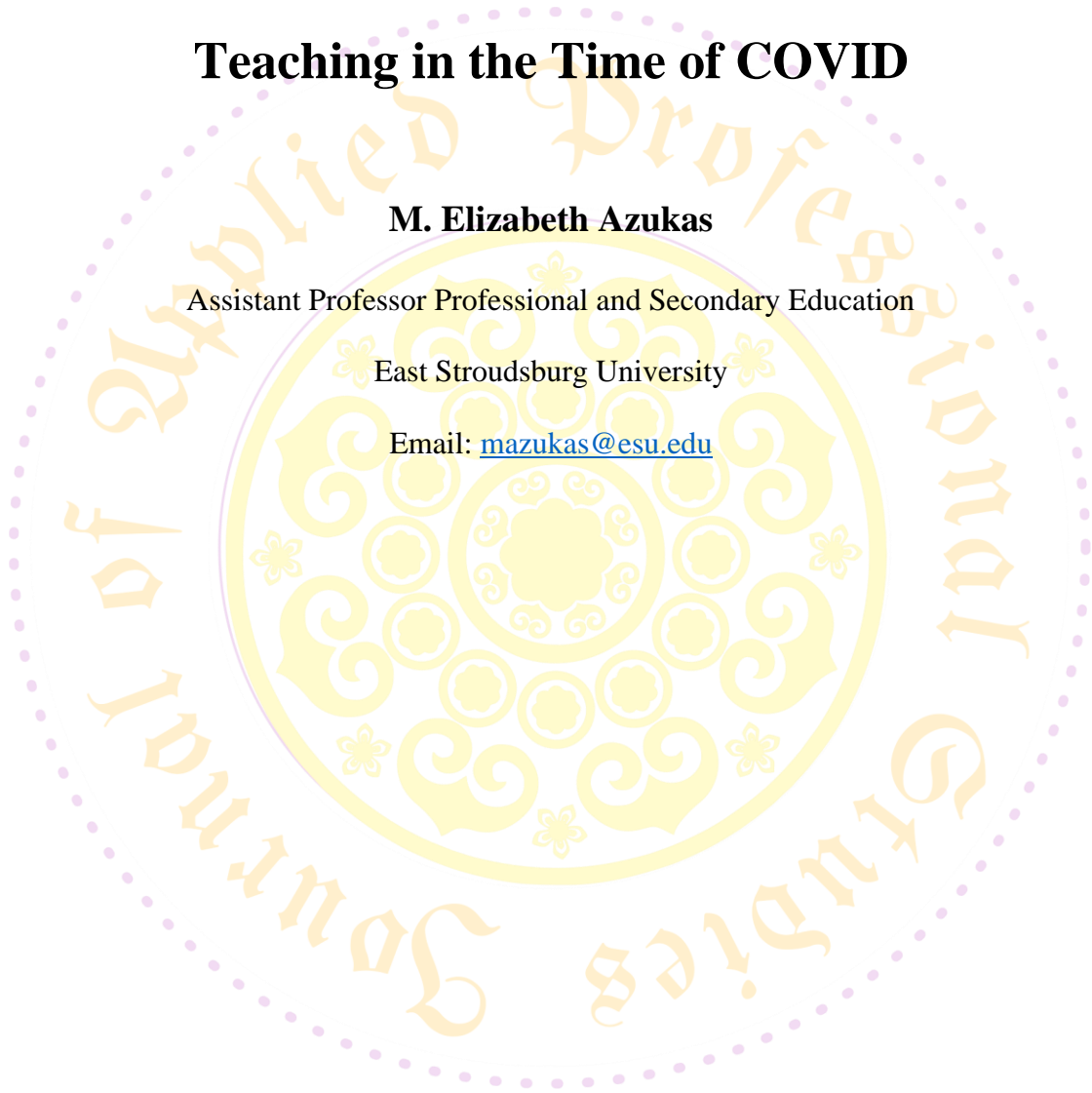
Teaching in the Time of COVID

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Abstract

The COVID-19 pandemic forced schools across the country to close last spring and teachers were asked to quickly shift to remote instruction. This study surveyed 295 teachers about their experiences with remote learning. The majority of teachers found the experience of remote learning to be positive overall. They experienced successes including enhanced connection with students, increased student engagement and participation, and benefits associated with the use of technology. Teachers also experienced challenges, some of which were in direct conflict with some of the reported successes or benefits, and included the amount of time required for preparation, technology challenges, a lack of connection with students, a lack of engagement and participation, less physicality, academic integrity issues and personal and family issues. Teachers provided recommendations for how districts could best support them with remote learning.

Key Words: Remote Learning, Remote Teaching, Pandemic, COVID-19, Teaching.

Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic forced schools across the country to close last spring and teachers were asked to quickly shift to “remote instruction” to maintain the continuity of learning. Many schools had no time to offer professional development and their technological preparedness differed greatly. Additionally, many schools struggled with providing instruction across the digital divide, as disadvantaged students who did not have access to computers or the Internet were further isolated by the pandemic. Concerns have been raised regarding teachers’ well-being during the pandemic including their ability to manage their own caretaking responsibilities while working and their ability to successfully deliver remote instruction.

Literature Review

Given the recency of this crisis, little research has been conducted on remote learning in this novel context to date. Kraft and Simon (2020) implemented a quantitative survey with just over 7,000 teachers and found that supportive working conditions were critical to teachers’ self-efficacy with remote learning. Most teachers credited their districts with trying to support them, however, even with support, remote learning posed a major challenge. Teachers also expressed concerns about levels of student engagement, particularly among students of color and those living in poverty. *Education Week* also conducted a study in which they found big gaps in technology access, significant truancy rates in lower-income schools, higher-poverty schools were less likely to implement live instruction, and rural, urban, and high poverty districts were far less able to reach all districts (Herold, 2020). The purpose of the study described herein was to better understand remote learning from the perspective of teachers including successes, challenges, and future professional development needs to assist in planning for the 2020-2021 school year.

Theoretical Frameworks

This study applies the theoretical frameworks of self-efficacy and Technological Pedagogical Content Knowledge (TPACK). The construct of self-efficacy refers to an individual's belief in his or her capability to "organize and execute the course of action required to manage prospective situations" (Bandura, 1997, p. 2). Expectations of personal efficacy determine how much task-related effort will be expended, how long that effort will be maintained, and whether an individual's coping behavior will be initiated (Bandura, 1982). Teachers' perceptions of their ability to implement remote instruction will impact the effectiveness of their instruction. Research has indicated a positive relationship between self-efficacy and different motivational and behavioral outcomes in clinical, educational, and organizational settings (Stajkovic & Luthans, 1998). Self-efficacy has been consistently recognized as an important attribute of effective teaching and has been positively correlated to teacher and student outcomes (Tshannan-Moran, Hoy, & Hoy, 1998).

TPACK builds on the work of Shulman's (1986) pedagogical content knowledge and explores the complex roles and interplay among 3 main components of the learning environment: content, pedagogy, and technology (Mishra & Koehler, 2006). It is a useful lens for understanding how teachers used technology and pedagogical strategies to implement their content in remote learning.

Methods

In August 2020, *Anonymous University* held a free online conference entitled *Igniting Innovation in Instruction: Online and Blended Learning*. Four-hundred and eighty-eight people participated in the conference. Two hundred and ninety-five chose to participate in a survey about their experiences with remote learning, which is a 60% response rate, considered sufficient to draw insights for this type of research (Baruch & Holtom, 2008). It is important to note, however, that the study employed convenience sampling since it was drawn only from conference participants and that the population is not a representative sample. The intent of the study, however, is not to make generalizable assertions but to contribute to the limited research to help us better understand the perceptions of teachers regarding their experiences with remote learning. Survey data included quantitative and qualitative components and were analyzed using descriptive statistics and grounded theory coding (Strauss & Corbin, 1997; Creswell, 2003).

The teacher participants represented all of the K-12 grade bands. Figure 1 displays the participant roles as a proportion of attendees.

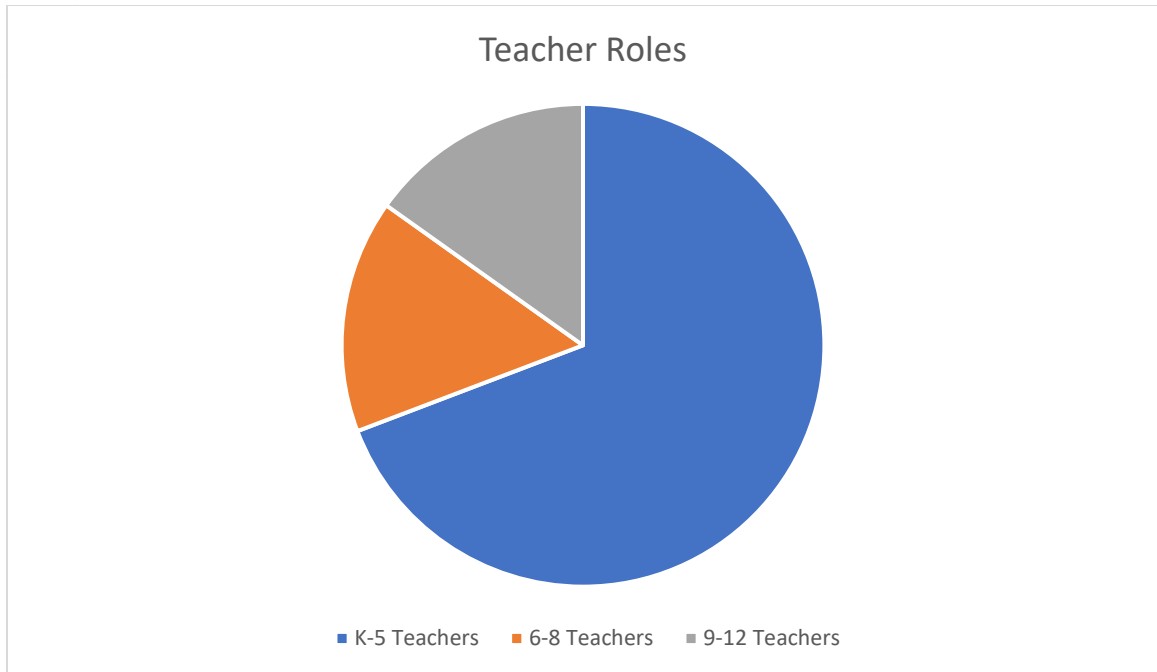


Figure 1. Teacher Roles.

The teachers who participated in the survey had a wide range of experience. Some were in their first year of teaching while others had over 20 years of experience. The majority of teachers in the study were experienced teachers. Table 1 depicts teacher participants and their years of experience.

Teacher Experience

Years of Experience	Percentage of Teacher
0-3	8.6%
4-5	4.8%
6-10	14.1%
11-15	18.6%
16-20	26.8%
20+	27.1%

Teacher participants were employed in a variety of settings including public schools, private schools, charter schools, and homeschool. Figure 2 shows the breakdown of participants from each type of school.

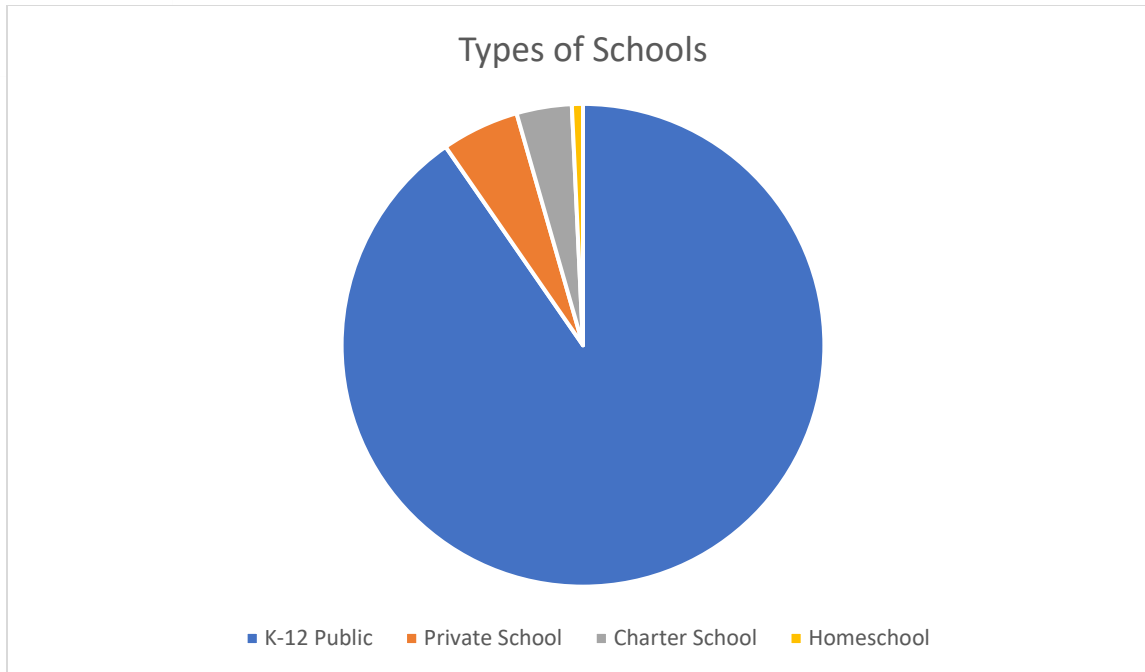


Figure 2. Types of Schools.

Eighty-five percent of teacher participants were from the state of Pennsylvania. Participants also included teachers from New Jersey, New York, Maryland, Delaware, Illinois, Florida, and Arizona.

Results

Seventy-five percent of participants indicated that they had received prior professional development or training on blended, online, or remote learning prior to attending the conference. Some teachers, particularly those with one-to-one laptop initiatives, reported that their districts had begun to implement professional development on online or blended learning prior to the COVID-19 pandemic. Some districts in Pennsylvania closed for 2 weeks prior to the implementation of remote learning which allowed for time for professional development. In other cases, teachers received professional development at some point after they were asked to begin the implementation of remote learning. Twenty-five percent of participants reported receiving no professional development or training prior to or at any time during the implementation of remote learning.

Teachers reported several successes with remote learning including enhanced connection with students, increased student engagement and participation, and benefits associated with the use of technology. Some of the teachers felt that they had enhanced connections to their students during remote learning because the format allowed for individual and small group instruction. Teachers were concerned about their students' well-being so they were checking in with them more. Bailey, a high school teacher, stated, "I believe the best aspect is getting to know a little bit more about my students 'personally.' Taking the time to chat is something often overlooked when face to face for instruction." Other teachers also commented on how the increased flexibility in their schedules actually permitted more interaction. Anne, an elementary school teacher reported, "The best part

was being able to be accessible to students and parents when they had questions.” Some teachers made a direct connection between their connection to students and increased student participation and engagement. John, a high school teacher stated, “I felt like my students were more active and engaged because I had better relationships with them.”

Many of the teachers, particularly those at the secondary level reported increased participation and engagement during remote learning. Jeannette, a middle school teacher reported, “The best aspect is that I had 86%+ participation for my class check-in sessions.” Jill, a high school math teacher indicated, “A positive aspect of remote learning was that I had a great turnout with students being on Zoom, so I was able to teach my math lessons live.” Other teacher attributed the increased participation and engagement to the flexibility in student schedules. Mary, a middle school teacher stated, “Students can complete their work asynchronously when it is convenient for them and they are feeling awake and motivated. They can also watch and re-watch my videos and take as much time as they need to complete assignments. Some of my students really needed this flexibility.”

Some of the teachers reported benefits related to the use of technology. One experienced elementary school teacher, Rachel, stated, “Honestly, the best aspect of remote learning is embracing technology more. I had been avoiding it, but this situation forced me to engage with technology and I believe this will improve my teaching.” Marnie, another elementary teacher, reported, “The best aspect of remote learning is seeing my students become more confident using technology and finding fun resources to engage my students that I can continue to use once remote learning is over.” Some teachers felt more freedom I being able to provide materials and create assignments. Ron, a high school teacher reported, “Most of the students didn’t have their textbooks accessible to them so I got to explore new and different resources to use with my students that included primary sources and diverse perspectives. I also got to explore assessments beyond the traditional textbook test.”

Teachers also reported several challenges with remote learning, some of which were in direct conflict with some of the reported successes or benefits, and included the amount of time required for preparation, technology challenges, a lack of connection with students, a lack of engagement and participation, less physicality, academic integrity issues and personal and family issues.

Teachers overwhelmingly indicated that planning for remote learning was more time consuming. Many had to find materials and then post them online, creating new assignments and assessments, while still teaching synchronously. Gwenn, a middle school teacher reported, “Time has certainly been a challenging factor. I find myself putting numerous hours into planning and preparation.” Lori, an elementary teacher stated, “The most challenging (thing) is having time to do it all; it takes a lot of planning, communicating with parents, and coordination to ensure that my students are online at their scheduled time.”

The teachers reported several challenges related to technology. Student access was a problem in every district, but to different degrees. David, a high school teacher, reported, “We had students with no computer and no Internet access.” Doug, a middle school instructor, indicated, “We didn’t even have a way to get the paper packets to some students efficiently.” In conjunction with access issues, some teachers reported that parents lacked the required technical knowledge to support their students. Amy, an elementary teacher, reported, “The most challenging was connectivity

issues amongst families and parents not knowing how to use technology (even when their students knew how).” Teachers were expected to have excellent facility with technology. In districts where students were not provided computers, teachers reported challenges in trying to find device agnostic applications as well as trying to support students when they were working on all kinds of different devices with all kinds of different software. The majority of school districts did not have technical support help lines for students. “I not only became their remote teacher, but also a computer tech assistant trying to navigate troubleshooting from multiple types of devices” reported Anne, one of the elementary teachers. Additionally, teachers reported challenges in how to best use technology to support students. For example, Mary a middle school teacher, stated, “The most challenging aspect of remote learning is how to best use technology (which technology is best used for which circumstances?)”

While some teachers felt that remote learning enhanced their connection to students and students’ participation and engagement, others felt this was a challenge. Some teachers commented on how fortunate they were to have known their students before the schools closed and they expressed concerns about getting to know their new students if school had to begin remotely. Others felt that it was difficult to connect to their students through a screen, particularly if their students did not have access to cameras. Meghan, a middle level instructor, reported, “It is difficult to determine their level of engagement when I can’t see them.” Others reported low attendance rates when they attempted to hold synchronous sessions. Teachers expressed concern about a lack of attendance and participation from special education and economically disadvantaged students. Annette, a special education teacher stated, “It is hard for me to tell how my students are progressing toward their IEP goals if I do not have regular interaction with them and their attendance was very poor.”

The lack of physicality involved in remote learning was presented as a challenge among both teachers and students, particularly those at the elementary level. Teachers expressed concern over the amount of time that they spent sitting at their computers. One teacher reported, “I sit a lot.” Another reinforced this idea by stating, “I am usually really active as a teacher. I am walking around the classroom constantly. I can’t get used to sitting in one place.” The teachers also expressed concern about the amount of screen time to which students were subjected and a lack of movement among elementary students in particular. Brian, an elementary teacher stated, “Third graders have to move. They just developmentally cannot sit at a computer screen the whole day.”

Many teachers reported that academic integrity was a challenge. At the elementary levels, where parent support is so essential, teachers expressed concerns about how to tell whether a student was completing the work on their own. Mavie, stated, “There were times I wondered whether I was grading work that the parent did and I was concerned about how to accurately track student progress.” Teachers at the secondary level reported concerns about students “Googling” answers to assignments, but this also prompted conversations in some districts about the nature of the work that teachers were assigning. Rob, a high school teacher summed this up well when he stated, “This did make us question the value in assigning work or creating assessments that were able to be Googled. I think it prompted a conversation about what learning really important.”

The final challenge reported by teachers was personal or family issues. This applied to the teachers themselves as well as the families they served. Some of the teachers surveyed had young children at home so when schools closed, they became the caregivers and supporting teachers to their own

children while also trying to teach. Julie, an elementary school teacher reported, “The most challenging aspect was trying to hold (teaching) sessions while having a preschooler and 3rd grader to care for.” Some teachers reported having family members sick with COVID-19 and struggling to assist their family members while worrying about their own safety, and teach at the same time. In addition to their own personal challenges, teachers cited the personal and family challenges of some of their students. A teacher noted, “Some families have more than one student, but only one computer and so not everyone can be online at a certain time during the day.” Teachers also expressed empathy for parents who were trying to support their children, while also working full time jobs. Elizabeth stated, “I teach 1st grade so the most challenging aspects is that my students are too young to get on by themselves and their parents are not always capable of or able to help them.”

Despite the challenges, 92% of the teachers reported having a positive experience with remote teaching overall. They identified several ways in which districts could continue to support them if remote learning were to continue in the 2020-2021 school year which included ensuring equitable access to computers and Internet services, offering technical support to students and their families, and providing parent workshops to help parents understand the technology as well as the best ways to support their students. The teachers also identified professional development topics that would enhance their ability to deliver remote instruction effectively which included research-based effective practices for online and blended learning, more training on specific technology tools such as Google Classroom and Zoom, and how to virtually monitor and assess progress, particularly on IEP goals.

Discussion

It is interesting to note that making connections and student engagement was seen as a benefit by some teachers and a challenge by others. This may have been influenced by several factors including the way in which teachers structured their remote learning, the age of the students, and whether the students were identified as low-income or special education students. Those teachers that found remote learning to benefit student relationships and engagement were focused on both and used the flexibility provided in working from home to structure more individual and small group instruction while those that found it challenging were typically offering whole group instruction. The age of the students may also have been a factor as more secondary educators reported it as a benefit, while those at the elementary level more often reported it as a challenge. Finally, special education teachers and those who serve economically disadvantaged students had greater challenges with student attendance and work submissions. This is consistent with the Herold (2020) and the Kraft and Simon (2020) studies.

Technology was also reported as both a benefit and a challenge. The pandemic forced both teachers and students to improve their technology skills, which may have many benefits. Teachers also experienced some freedom in exploring new resources and methods for assessment. It will be interesting to see whether the pandemic results in changes to the ways that teachers integrate technology with their pedagogical practice to teach their content post-pandemic. It is clear that districts need to provide technical training to teachers, students, and parents to limit the burden many teachers felt in being the “help desk” for families. They also need to address inequities that create the digital divide.

Concerns about academic integrity prompted some teachers to reflect on the purpose of learning and to re-evaluate and then re-write some of their assignments and assessments. Education reformers have long been focused on deeper learning which is focused on creating “ambitious and meaningful tasks that reflect how knowledge is used in the field,” engage students in active learning, and encourage metacognitive and strategic thinking (Noguera, Darling-Hammond, & Friedlander, 2015, p. 6). The pandemic may create opportunities for teachers to reflect on their pedagogical and content choices and shift instruction from rote memorization to deeper learning.

Finally, it is important that districts take into account the health and well-being of teachers during this challenging time. Teachers need guidance and support in maintaining a healthy work-life balance. Their care-taking responsibilities must be taken into consideration and options should be considered for flexible work schedules that optimize teacher performance.

Conclusion

The COVID-19 pandemic resulted in school closings and a rapid shift to remote learning to maintain the continuity of instruction. Remote teachers experienced successes or benefits which included enhanced connection with students, increased student engagement and participation, and benefits associated with the use of technology. Teachers also experienced challenges, some of which were in direct conflict with some of the reported successes or benefits, and included the amount of time required for preparation, technology challenges, a lack of connection with students, a lack of engagement and participation, less physicality, academic integrity issues and personal and family issues. It looks as though fall of 2021 will also involve at least some form of remote learning. Teachers identified several ways that districts could support them with remote learning which included ensuring equitable access to computers and Internet services, offering technical support to students and their families, and providing parent workshops to help parents understand the technology as well as the best ways to support their students. The teachers also identified professional development topics that would enhance their self-efficacy in the delivery of remote instruction. Topics included research-based effective practices for online and blended learning, more training on specific technology tools such as Google Classroom and Zoom, and how to virtually monitor and assess progress, particularly on IEP goals. Additional research is needed to continue to better understand teacher perspectives and implementation of remote learning as well as the potential long-term effects on instruction in terms of the ways in which teachers navigate the complex relationships between technical knowledge, pedagogical knowledge, and content knowledge.

About the Author

Dr. Elizabeth Azukas is an Assistant Professor at East Stroudsburg University of Pennsylvania. Dr. Azukas has been an educator for more than 25 years, with experience teaching at the elementary, middle, high school, and post-secondary levels. She has held a number of different leadership roles including working as a curriculum supervisor, principal, curriculum director, and as an assistant superintendent. Her career has focused primarily on innovation in education with the goal of increasing equity and access for all students as well as promoting authentic personalized learning. Dr. Azukas’s work experience includes holding a key leadership role with the Office of

Innovation for the New York Department of Education, in which she participated in the launch of the largest blended learning initiative in the country and facilitated several school re-designs. She held several leadership roles with the ground-breaking Florida Virtual School, named one of the “Coolest Schools in America” by Parent and Child Magazine. Here, she initiated the development of the first game-based online American history course: Conspiracy Code, for which the organization won a SIIA CODiE Award. Most recently, Dr. Azukas’s work has focused on cultivating communities of practice to promote teacher self-efficacy in the implementation of P-12 personalized learning. She consults with schools all over the world to facilitate strategic planning and innovative school redesigns. She has consulted with several universities and non-profit organizations in the development of innovative and accessible online programming. For example, she designed a course on leading online learning for the New York State’s Superintendent’s Council. Other areas of interest/expertise include leading educational change; innovation and entrepreneurial skills; design thinking; curriculum development, alignment, and evaluation; competency-based learning; teacher staffing, coaching, and supervision; strategic planning; teacher and student creativity; online and blended learning, and communities of practice.

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