

Chapter 15

One School's Transition to Online Teaching During the COVID-19 Pandemic: A Pre-Planned Necessity and Lessons Learned

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ABSTRACT

The chapter addresses the response of one school, ACS Athens, a K-12 international school in Athens, Greece, to the COVID-19 pandemic lockdown. The administration, foreseeing the necessity to include online/blended instruction within the curriculum in response to a changing educational landscape and technological advancements, had prepared Middle School and High School teachers and learners for online instruction and had facilitated the design and implementation of digital courses. Conversely, the Elementary school teachers received training for online teaching during lockdown. Additionally, four necessary pillars were considered when designing online learning, as necessary to ensure a seamless transition and uninterrupted learning: the i2Flex instructional methodology, reflective practitioners, social-emotional wellbeing, and the development of conscious citizenship.

INTRODUCTION

The COVID-19 pandemic called for a different kind of learning that would insure uninterrupted instruction. For such learning to take place educational institutions must have a well thought plan that prepared teachers and learners prior to the disruptive change that took place. Educational Institutions such as ACS

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Athens --a K-12 International school located in Athens, Greece-- that are at the forefront of change and often drive change, responded to this unprecedented event with confidence and determination to succeed. Administration considered four pillars as necessary to ensure a smooth and seamless transition to the digital platform: the i²Flex instructional methodology, reflective practitioners, social-emotional wellbeing and the development of conscious citizenship. Continuous professional development ensured that Middle School(MS) and High School(HS) teachers received the necessary support to complete the design of Moodle courses that supported and facilitated both synchronous and asynchronous instruction. Such instruction practices followed research-based best practice that considered the wellbeing of students by providing carefully designed synchronous and asynchronous instructional screen time to avoid adverse psychological effects due to prolonged time on the screen. Elementary school (ES) teachers also participated in professional development that included training for online teaching based on a 5-phase model to develop such practice (Avgerinou & Moros, 2020b). For ES teachers this type of teaching was a first, as there was no indication that such learning would be necessary at that level of school. Teachers at ACS Athens however, who have been used to driving educational change, responded quickly and optimally to the challenge, creating instructional practice that allowed learning to continue uninterrupted. During this time, it was necessary to develop a holistic approach to learning. Such practice encouraged teachers to be reflective practitioners so that reflection of practice led to refinement and finetuning. Additionally, the wellbeing of the community was at the forefront, thus, social emotional support was provided via counseling, psychological groups and wellbeing newsletters and handbooks for students, teachers and parents. Furthermore, co-curricular activities, music performances and drama sessions as well as college guidance sessions continued undisturbed. Finally, development of conscious citizens; individuals who turn knowledge and skill to action so as to improve life and living on the planet, was non-stop and students were provided opportunities for community service. This led to numerous initiatives by students themselves ensuring that their contributions to bettering the community around them continued.

TRANSITIONING TO ONLINE LEARNING: A PRE-PLANNED NECESSITY

The announcement of the COVID-19 outbreak in China on December 31st, 2019, and Wuhan's total lockdown on January 23, 2020 caught the world by surprise. Conflicting information about the seriousness of the outbreak and its likely spread created a climate of uncertainty and fear, particularly among international schools due to their considerable population from China's inflicted areas. On January 23, 2020, the ACS Athens Crisis Management Team convened an emergency meeting to discuss the potential risks to the school's community and develop internal protocols to ensure the safety of the school's community at large. Protocols for travelers and increased observance of hygiene and cleanliness were in place almost immediately following the Wuhan lockdown. This proactive management approach and response to a crisis was not a random reaction but rather the result of a comprehensive, well thought plan based on the safety systems in place and the systematic process of internalizing external risk responses. Likewise, in the first two weeks following the announcement of the lockdown in Wuhan, the educational leadership team discussed contingency plans for different teaching and learning needs likely to arise in the case of the widespread virus in the community.

During the February Parent Teacher Organization (PTO) meeting, when parents asked, "what will happen if the government closes all schools?", the administration's response was natural and comfortable: "No need to worry, the school is ready to operate online". The degree of comfort in the response

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