

Cultivating a Culture of Collaboration: Pivoting at a Professional Development School

Aisja Jones

Killian STEAM Magnet Elementary School

KEYWORDS: Clinical educator, Collaboration, Professional Development Schools, School Culture, School-University Partnerships, Student teaching, Technology

ABSTRACT

This article, written by a third-grade teacher, provides a first-hand account of collaboration and reflection with a student teacher intern while teaching in a Professional Development School (school-university partnership school) during the COVID-19 pandemic. The teacher details the process of pivoting during technology issues before and during instruction.

NAPDS NINE ESSENTIALS (2nd Edition) ADDRESSED IN THIS ARTICLE:

1. A professional development school (PDS) is a learning community guided by a comprehensive, articulated mission that is broader than the goals of any single partner, and that aims to advance equity, antiracism, and social justice within and among schools, colleges/universities, and their respective community and professional partners.
2. A PDS embraces the preparation of educators through clinical practice.
3. A PDS is a context for continuous professional learning and leading for all participants, guided by need and a spirit and practice of inquiry.
4. A PDS makes a shared commitment to reflective practice, responsive innovation, and generative knowledge.
5. A PDS is a community that engages in collaborative research and participates in the public sharing of results in a variety of outlets.

A lone ballerina with her toe down, head up, constantly spinning is the image I conjure when I think of pivoting. Yet my experiences with pivoting are vastly different and less graceful. During a global pandemic, these experiences have multiplied.

At 5:30 p.m. my district's Google Suite disappeared.

At 5:30 a.m. the next morning, the Google Suite is still down.

Walking to the classroom takes forever; the hallway extends another 30 feet. I mumble, wave, and smile at my colleagues hiding a heavy cloak of anxiety. I begin to think about the implications of not having access to Google Suite and its impact on my students. My concern is escalating.

I teach third-grade students. Most years, I have about 17 students on my roster. This year is different. I still teach third grade, but now I have 28 students. The drastic change in class size is due to teaching through a global pandemic. In the age of COVID-19, changes to how we think about teaching and learning are a part of our "new normal" as educators. Not only has the number of students on my roster increased, but I am also teaching in a unique setting. I am a virtual teacher, and I teach all of my students online. All of my lesson materials are online, and students access them through Google Suite.

I take a deep breath and start the mental process of pivoting.

Up until this point, I knew that teaching through a pandemic had its challenges, but to date, this is the moment that is most out of my sphere of control. In my peripheral view, a figure emerges in the classroom doorway. It's my intern. In the light of her smile, I am able to mask some of my anxious thoughts because as they say, "The show must go on."

I don't inform her of the power outage because I feel sure somebody from the district office will cancel school. I turn my cell phone on a very loud chime so as not to miss an email stating such.

No one from the district cancels school, so my principal does not send the text. Bridget and I exchange pleasantries.

Over the course of 14 weeks, Bridget has become acquainted with the students. She led small groups during synchronous times, using her own Google classroom as a breakout room. In the beginning of her leading small groups, she was a little unsettled because students were not as responsive as she remembered in her previous face-to-face placement. I confided in her that I felt the same pang of rejection. I reassured her that giving students her focused attention in small groups is impactful in a virtual setting and that with time they would respond. I modeled elaborating on one student's response and having students respond to each other by providing prompts such as "I agree with Kamarie," and, "I would like to add..." As the semester continued, Bridget's pivot was illustrated through her ability to facilitate discussion through peer-to-peer communication, which led to increased observable student engagement.

I gently break the news to her about the Google Suite outage. In her eyes, I anticipate my students' worry. I know that when students become aware of the outage, they will fret over what to do in the interim. Her eyes suggest she is waiting for an alternative plan, just like my students will.

I hope I reflect an air of confidence.

It is now 7:31 a.m. and still no Google Suite, but we do have the internet.

As a mentor teacher, I am aware that presentation matters as mentees are impressionable. So, I remain calm even though I am in knots on the inside. I take a mental retreat to a situation when professionalism was practiced in the face of pivoting.

Prior support came in the form of collaborative moments with our university partner-liaison, Dr. Thompson. Killian Elementary is a professional development school (PDS), which means that we have an ongoing and reciprocal partnership with the University of South Carolina. Our liaison of 20 years has dual roles at Killian: when he is not teaching an immersion science methods course to preservice teachers, he is supporting faculty with professional development. For three years, we have practiced professionalism as we have co-planned and collaborated on teaching full science units that incorporate what he calls "sense-making" activities. We share in making and collecting knowledge from our shared experiences; our work enables both tall teachers (the adult teaching candidates) and small teachers (the children) to have lots of opportunities to make sense of difficult science concepts like erosion and weathering.

For instance, we spend time after every lesson reflecting and pivoting for the next session. During one reflection session, we noticed that there was not enough time to teach the full cycle of a guided inquiry science lesson in one class period, so we decided to chunk the components across a three-week lesson sequence. This pivot made a positive impact on student engagement as we noticed that his students, the tall teachers, were able to concentrate on one part of the inquiry at a time, and my students, the small teachers, were better able to articulate science thinking within small groups. And I, through this professional pivoting paradigm, have moved from needing scaffolds to teach to planning units of study on my own. Ultimately, we noticed where we needed to adjust our plans to meet the needs of learners. Our relationship strengthens our shared collegial pursuits; I was interested in becoming a better science teacher and he was interested in giving preservice teachers authentic experiences in a classroom. Those times of collaboration prepared me for this moment when I need to illustrate to my intern what to do when what you plan has to shift due to circumstances outside of our control.

We sit for a moment and gather our thoughts.

The applications and extensions in Google Suite are easy to use and student-friendly. I hyperlink websites into the lesson plan. Websites such as [Readworks.org](https://www.readworks.org/), [Flocabulary](https://www.flocabulary.com/), and, my favorite, [Nearpod](https://www.nearpod.com/) are class staples. I have spent the first nine weeks creating videos using [WeVideo](https://www.wecanvideo.com/) for core content and explaining how to access and enter various websites. During check-in times, my students started sharing shortcuts they use to navigate the internet, and I captured their demonstrations in multiple videos. At that moment I realize that my students are

prepared to pivot alongside us.

On opposite sides of the room, we begin to plan an asynchronous lesson for the students called a student pathway. We collaborate on a shared document before we create a lesson plan for students. Teaching through a pandemic is innovative. We begin to brainstorm a lesson. Today is Veterans Day. So, we set out to design a student pathway about “[Thanking A Veteran](#)” using the Wakelet multimedia tool. As a colleague, she offers her expertise, and together we craft a learning module for our students. Because of the need to shift today’s plan, Bridget is able to experience not only the demands of our profession but also the rewards. Our mission is complete.

It’s 8:15 a.m. The Google Suite is still down, but together we pivot toward possibility.

How will you use your support system to become an agent of change in your school context? What will you do to ensure that preservice teachers get the practical experience of collaborating even during a pandemic? What expertise will you model to ensure preservice teachers have authentic and meaningful experiences before they have a class of their own?

Teaching through a pandemic has been challenging, yet my image of pivoting has expanded beyond graceful ballerinas. My experiences with pivoting are grounded in the daily cultivation of practicing professionalism as an educator. Being reflective, supportive, and collaborative is my new image of pivoting.

Aisja Jones (ajaisjajones@gmail.com) is a third-grade teacher at Killian STEAM Magnet Elementary, doctoral student at University of South Carolina, mentor teacher, and PDS Fellow.