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Progressive Virtual Learning for our Youngest Learners

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Progressive Virtual Learning for our Youngest Learners

by

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Early Childhood and Childhood General Education

Mentor:

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Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements of the degree of Masters of Education

Bank Street College of Education

2021

Abstract

This study addresses how teachers build a progressive curriculum online for our youngest learners. Our youngest learners learn through play and the author sought to gather data in order to understand how teachers approached this age group in an online space. To conduct the research, ten observations were made of a pre-k class and a first grade class. Through observation and recording, four main themes were identified that progressive educators were using to create progressive curricula: Building Community, Progressive Pedagogy, Student Voice and the Home-School Connection. To build community the teachers observed had students bring objects from home, offered consistent morning meeting routines, acknowledged everyone on the calls, checked in on where different children were living and spent time hearing about the children's lives outside of the classroom. Identifying a progressive pedagogy meant the teachers made the lessons student centered, had the children engage with different materials, used experiential learning and had an interdisciplinary curriculum. Examining the home-school connection was a consistent theme and the communication between the home and the school was of crucial importance in supporting young learners. Work needed to be uploaded, technological problems needed to be addressed, and communication about the child needed to consistently happen. Equity emerged as an important consideration since some students had more support at home than others. Other key findings related to the difference between managing a fully remote classroom versus a hybrid classroom, in which a teacher is teaching to both students on ground and fully remote students. Also, questions remain regarding how a teacher attends to the physical needs of a virtual student.

Table of Contents

Abstract	2
Introduction	4
Question	4
Focus	4
Rationale	4
Literature Review	5
Methodology	9
Themes that Emerged from the Data	11
Building Community	11
Morning Meeting Routines	11
Acknowledging Everyone on the Calls	12
Checking In on Where Different Children are Living	12
Time Spent Hearing About Children's Lives Outside of School	12
Progressive Pedagogy	13
Student-Centered	13
Engagement with Materials	13
Experiential Learning	14
Interdisciplinary Curriculum	14
Student Voice	15
The Home-School Collaboration for Early Childhood Learners	15
Findings and Conclusions	16
Appendices	21

Introduction

Question

How do teachers build a progressive online learning experience for very young children?

Focus

How can teachers offer modifications and get to know each learner and meet them where they are virtually? How can a teacher support a more introverted student online? How can a teacher ensure that they are getting the most out of the student with no face-to-face time? How can a teacher create the relationship so that the students are motivated to do their best work and not rush through assignments? It seems that the in-class experience makes it easier for a teacher to create a classroom community and develop the routines and structure and set expectations. How can these same methods translate virtually to maintain classroom management and to make the most of the experience? For our youngest learners, is it necessary for teachers to be more flexible with time and should they work to find times and opportunities that work for the families of their students even if they are late at night or in the early morning? In this paper, I will investigate how teachers can build a progressive online learning experience for very young children.

Rationale

Bank Street College of Education teaches teachers how to effectively teach children through the lens of progressive pedagogy. Bank Street students study Dewey, Vygotsky, Nager, Biber and many others to learn how best to support children and teach them. The biggest takeaway for me has been the value of play and observation in order to better understand the student and know how best to create a curriculum to meet where they are. Through student

inquiry, curriculum is developed. Specifically focusing on 4's-7's, which is PreK through first grade in many schools, I wonder about the possibilities for a progressive curriculum to be done virtually. How does a teacher observe the play of a student over a computer to foster student inquiry? How does a teacher create a curriculum to meet learners where they are if the teacher is not watching each child maneuver around a classroom? I wonder about the impact that virtual learning has on younger children. I wonder this because I spent time in different settings teaching ages 4-7 and so much of the day was about the collaboration among children and noticing how they focus, sit, play, share, collaborate and move. During the time of COVID-19, what is the impact on these very young children?

Social justice and privilege must be a part of this question. Certain teachers and schools have been given the resources to support this unprecedented time. How does this truth factor into the question of offering progressive online teaching? What is happening to students who are home without internet access or who do not have another adult to support what the teacher is trying to do online? COVID-19 has exacerbated the inequities that have always existed in our school system and have made them even more apparent.

Finally, what communication needs to take place so that teachers, parents, and their children are all working together to support learning and growth? The intention of my IMP is to create a resource that will support teachers and parents in thinking more deeply about issues related to virtual learning.

Literature Review

The COVID-19 Pandemic has resulted in many young children learning and attending school virtually. Through my own experience as a mom, a children's yoga teacher, a graduate

student at Bank Street, and a student teacher, I have come to understand the importance of play and progressive pedagogy. My study question is: *How do teachers build a progressive online learning experience for very young children?*

The classes at Bank Street were intriguing. I began in the Spring of 2015. The first class that I took was Child Development with Abby Kerlin. As a mom of four children, with children ages 12, 10, 8 and 6, I thought this class would be easy for me. I thought this because I had just experienced the early childhood years with my own children and felt confident that I knew about development. It was fascinating how the first night we began learning about the cultural nature of development and different biases and sleep habits. The information was so different from the books I had been reading about my babies hitting certain milestones. We analyzed toy stores and culture and really discussed the importance of play. It was the discussion of play that I held onto most because I saw how the PreK teacher at my son's school understood him so well by observing his play. I noticed at the JCC Nursery school that the teachers were writing down my children's words and allowing so much time for play and analysis. I noticed that when I taught yoga classes to the children at the JCC Nursery School, they wanted to run around the gym and play! Paley (2004) explained, "The children themselves continually reminded us that play was still their most usable context. It was not the monsters they invented that frightened them in kindergarten; it was being told to sit still and pay attention for long periods of time" (p. 234). During the children's yoga classes that I taught, it was challenging to hold the students' attention and I always had to think of creative ways to keep the students engaged. Sometimes I'd bring a ball to pass around with our feet, other times I'd do a metacognition game. I began to collaborate with the classroom teachers to connect our yoga adventures to the curriculum. It was

clear the children did much better when I was connecting the yoga class to their curriculum and we were playing; things didn't go as well when I was telling them what to do. I also had students running out of the circle and that was ok. It was ok because of what I learned in Child Development. Before that time I would have been more inclined to tell the students that they had to stay and do what I was telling them to do. These first experiences teaching in a school setting propelled me towards a deeper curiosity of play. Dewey (1938) wrote,

Everything depends upon the quality of the experience which is had... There is an immediate aspect of agreeableness or disagreeableness, and there is its influence upon later experiences. Hence, in order for an experience to be educative it must draw from prior experience, prepare for future experiences and use the current environment for the students to interact with. (p. 27)

This is something that I was noticing with the yoga classes and also what I noticed during student teaching. The students connected to the curriculum when it drew on prior knowledge and they could then reflect on the knowledge tangibly through art, writing or play. I wonder how teachers are going to create learning experiences with play virtually.

Another Bank Street class that proved to be incredibly valuable was Observation and Recording. In this class, I had a study child who I observed in school over the course of ten weeks. I would observe the child during work time and recess and write down in a double entry journal what I observed. A double entry journal is a double ledger journal where one side is purely unbiased observations and the other side is what I was thinking and it is subjective. I then looked for patterns that emerged from the observations. Watching this student over the course of time and analyzing the play on my own was a very useful experience. I was able to see how the child had different expressions of himself in the classroom and outdoors. This level of

observation reinforced what I was learning at Bank Street as it related to play. Biber (1951) wrote,

What do play experiences do for child growth? If a child can have a really full wholesome experience with play, he will be having the most wholesome kind of fun that a child can have. For a child to have fun is basic to his future happiness. His early childhood play may become the basic substance out of which he lays down one of his life patterns, namely, not only that one can have fun but that one can create fun. (p. 48)

I was able to see this first hand as I analysed the study child at play. My final reflection was how this child was more at ease in the classroom with the structure and expectations set and how once this child got outdoors and the rules were less defined, the child became less regulated. Hence, so much learning came through observation. How are teachers going to make these kinds of observations virtually?

Out of the Classroom and into the World by Salvatore Vascellaro propelled me to think more deeply about experiences and play. Vascellaro (2011) wrote, “The sensorial vividness of experience, the emotion evoked from person-to-person exchange, and the newness of it all are powerful” (p. 213). In curriculum class we spent time discussing the role of field trips in education and how to think of an activity to reflect on the shared experience. So much of what I took away from the course was the value of children physically being somewhere and experiencing something and then taking time to reflect on the experience. Again, this brings me to my study question of how this can be done virtually?

My passion for progressive education began twelve years ago when my eldest son began PreK at Fieldston Lower. It became more obvious that the methods that were working in the yoga classes were based on progressive pedagogy and yet I didn't know that at the time. My son's PreK teacher, Cathy, was analyzing his play and telling me his deep feelings around my

current pregnancy. She even created a curriculum especially for him around babies. This was all part of the child-centered approach to learning , but something that I was unfamiliar with. Biber (1951) wrote,

In dramatic play, children also find a sense of confidence in their own impulses. There are no directions to follow, no rules to stick to. Whatever they do will be good and right. Wherever their impulses lead them, that is the way to follow. This is the freedom children should have in their play, an absence of boundaries and prescriptions that we cannot grant them outside of their play lives. (p. 48)

Cathy was offering this to my son which was allowing her to see him and what was going on with him. I was beginning to experience the value of play but didn't yet know why it was so important. It was during this time in 2014 that I applied to the Bank Street School of Education with a reference from my son's PreK teacher and the director of the JCC Manhattan Nursery school.

These observations of the value of a progressive education and play have brought me to my question of study. How do teachers build a progressive online learning experience for very young children? So much of my own experience with Lil Yogis NYC and observing and student teaching and raising my own children has taught me the value of play, so how do we effectively give young children what they need virtually? I ask this question because of my own authentic process of understanding the value of experience and play and am eager to see how teachers implement these ideals virtually.

Methodology

In order to conduct this research, I received permission to conduct research from two teachers and the Principal of Fieldston Lower School. I asked them for permission to observe their virtual classes. One teacher teaches PreK and the other teaches 1st grade. I asked each

teacher if it would be possible to observe five virtual classes, a combination of morning meeting, work time and math. I made a total of ten observations in the same style that I learned in Observation and Recording. I used a double ledger journal (see Appendix 1) and on the left side I only wrote what I observed while on the right side I wrote down what I was thinking.

I conducted the research between October and December, making one or two observations per week. I arranged meeting times with the teachers. I logged onto the calls, said hello to the class and then stayed quiet and conducted the observation.

Once all of the data was collected, I analyzed all of the data and found recurring themes. I color-coded the themes (see Appendix 2) to help me organize the data. I took all of the data and put it into the appropriate theme. I was then able to organize the data within the themes and reflect on what the data was telling me in order to determine what really worked virtually to provide a progressive education for our youngest learners. The themes that emerged were: Building Community, Progressive Pedagogy, Student Voice, and the Home-School Connection. Building community is a way that teachers worked to make the virtual classroom feel like a shared space for all. There were several things that teachers did to do this that I will go into detail about below. By having students bring objects from home, establishing morning meeting routines, acknowledging everyone on the calls, checking in on where different children are living and spending time hearing about children's lives outside of school, the teachers were able to create a classroom feel virtually.

Themes that Emerged from the Data

Building Community

Building community is a way that teachers worked to make the virtual classroom feel like a shared space for all. There were several things that teachers did to do this that I will go into detail about below. By having students bring objects from home, establishing morning meeting routines, acknowledging everyone on the calls, checking in on where different children are living and spending time hearing about childrens' lives outside of school, the teachers were able to create a classroom community virtually.

Bringing Objects from Home

Allowing children to bring in home objects and share in a virtual setting was a common way the teachers I observed built community virtually. Sadie was able to bring her doll, Micky brought his word search book and Dani brought her alphabet book. These were just a few of many examples of the teachers not only allowing the students to bring toys to the session but using the toys as a conversation starter with the child and the group. Micky told the group the first word that he found. Dani asked the children to name things that began with certain letters that she turned to. The objects became ice breakers to begin conversations.

Morning Meeting Routines

Keeping consistent morning meeting routines also served to build community. All PreK morning meetings began with the weather, the calendar and the singing bowl, which is used for a morning meditation. The students knew what to expect and who was the next person in the group to have the job of calendar keeper or weather person. Lila unmuted herself immediately the day it was her turn to conduct the weather report.

Acknowledging Everyone on the Calls

The teachers worked to make all children feel seen and heard. One way this was done was by saying each child's name when saying hello. In first grade, the teacher had every student hold up their fingers to say how they were feeling: a one was bad, a two was good and a three was ok. The teacher then said each child and how they were feeling. When I joined the calls the teachers told the children who I was and what I was doing. In a first grade observation the teacher gave each child a turn to tell a joke.

Checking In on Where Different Children are Living

The students were living in different places, Sadie in New Jersey, Maddy in North Carolina and Dani in Delaware. The teacher asked each child to tell the weather where that child was living after the assigned job of weather person was over. This brought all of the children into the conversation.

Time Spent Hearing About Children's Lives Outside of School

The teachers allotted time to give the children a chance to discuss their lives outside of school. In first grade, Monday mornings were always allotted to writing their weekend news. Each child was given a chance to share. In another observation, Zoi was able to tell the group about her sister's play, Micky told the class about his haircut and the PreK class shared what they would be for Halloween. These conversations happen naturally on ground and giving the students a time to speak casually virtually proved to be a common method to build community.

Progressive Pedagogy

The teachers that I observed are trained progressive education teachers. They created virtual spaces that were student centered, that had an opportunity for students to engage with materials, that were rooted in experiential learning and that had a cross curricular approach to learning. Rather than the teachers talking at the students, they really listened to what the students were thinking and met the students where they were. The students were all sent loads of materials to work with and the lessons were mostly created with manipulatives and something tactile to work with. The teachers noticed that the students were able to reflect on an experience that they had so the teachers created experiences for the remote children and then taught from the experiences. Finally, the teachers created an interdisciplinary approach to learning where the topics that were learned in one subject were woven into other subjects as well.

Student-Centered

The PreK teacher was narrating everything the children were doing during work time. The cutting, the glueing, the choices being made were all being discussed. The teacher was observing all behavior and narrating it for the group. When the children finished an activity, the teacher had another plan ready to go. Children were able to discuss their home objects and tell their personal stories and share their projects. The lessons observed were student-centered, the children were the focus and the lesson was altered if comprehension was not yet there. This happened during the 1st grade math class with the base ten blocks.

Engagement with Materials

The school sent home materials for the children: they had scissors, paper, clay and math manipulatives. The teachers asked the children to use the materials and work on things while

being observed. In one observation, a child became quite frustrated with the scissors and the teacher suggested she rip the paper instead. Giving children different mediums to work with was a common theme. The children had math manipulatives sent home. They were able to use dice, base ten blocks and Cuisenaire rods for math games.

Experiential Learning

In PreK, the teacher brought items from Ramsey's farm into the classroom. A different item was shown every day of the week. First, a pumpkin, then a gourd, then flowers, then a tiny pumpkin, and finally a large pumpkin that the class cut into a jack-o-lantern. The teacher asked the parents to take the students to a local farm if possible over the weekend. All of the students on the call shared about their own experience with their families on a farm and were able to connect to the experience of bringing the field trip into the classroom.

Interdisciplinary Curriculum

The topics that the students were studying were woven into the different subjects. In the first grade class the students were learning about coins and money. During morning meetings, the children always talked about how many days they have been in school. They then used straws to depict how many days. The day that I observed was the 42nd day of school. The teacher asked the students to tell her how they could make 42 using coins. This was a wonderful way to bring in what they were learning about coins in math into the morning meeting. In PreK, the students were painting during work time. For the morning meeting, the teacher read the students *White Rabbits* color book by Alan Baker. Again, she was using an interdisciplinary curriculum by allowing topics to be covered across various subjects. The money unit is being used in the morning meeting and in math.

Student Voice

On a virtual learning call the children stay muted. If not, there is background noise and echos. The teachers navigated the mute button in different ways. In PreK there was a child who was always interrupting and unmuting herself. On one observation, the child says she has her slime. This is during calendar update. The teacher mutes her. The child unmutes and starts singing. The teacher mutes her again. The child unmutes herself. The teacher tells her that if she needs to talk she needs to turn her microphone off. On ground, children speak out of turn and the teacher must manage the classroom. Virtually, the children stay muted and the teacher is able to mute the children which is different because most times if children are talking at home the class doesn't hear them. In the case of the child in PreK, the disruption was because she was unmuting herself. This is not so different from a child calling out on ground. I noticed that the mute button created a different dynamic with participation because there was an extra step that children and teachers needed to go through in order for a child to speak out. On all of my observations, the teachers asked that the children stay muted.

The Home-School Collaboration for Early Childhood Learners

On many observations children left the class to find an adult. This happened for various reasons. In one case a child needed something printed out, another time a child was frustrated with the math lesson and went to get his dad; a prek student needed help opening the glue. It was important that these children had an adult nearby to assist in various challenges. The teachers encouraged the students to ask a grown-up at home. I never saw a teacher speak directly to the parent who was assisting the child.

Findings and Conclusions

I went into this project really believing that virtual learning was not healthy nor possible for young learners. My time at Bank Street highlighted the necessity for child play and engagement and I felt that too much of this was lacking in a virtual environment. This experience changed my perspective, and I was able to see that there is a lot of learning that can take place virtually and it just requires a certain level of planning and teaching to make that happen.

I was most surprised by the resilience of the children and the creativity of the teachers. Watching a field trip brought into a classroom item by item was amazing. Sending the children to the farm with the parents and pairing the lessons with the in-class discussion of pumpkins and gourds gave the children a progressive learning experience in which they could get the same learning as actually going on the field trip with the class. Hudson (2020) wrote,

A child spending 1-2 hours a day on schoolwork is not just learning for 1-2 hours a day. Kids learn through play. They learn through talking with their families. They learn through cooking. And they learn through simply existing through a global pandemic. It's time to honor those experiences, ease up on ourselves, and not try to mimic school exactly. We're learning differently these days, and that's okay. (para. 8)

The home-school collaboration is more important than ever in a virtual setting for our youngest learners. The children needed somebody to support them nearby to assist with technological challenges, be present for screen breaks and help in moments of frustration. I noticed that the teachers that I observed appreciated the support nearby and relied on them for support. I still wonder how young learners without this support nearby get through these challenges and what those teachers can do to account for those differences.

The mute button was also an interesting element to me. In a virtual classroom, in a larger group, the children must be muted. I wonder how that impacts student voice in a progressive environment. However, having children muted really takes away from a live classroom feel. I did notice that when there are fewer children on a call, the feedback is less. Perhaps teachers can find opportunities in the school day when children can be on a call unmuted in smaller groups. The process of unmuting is challenging for our youngest learners and takes time. I wonder how asking students to mute themselves thwarts student voice? The early childhood classroom is never quiet, when we mute everybody the classroom is completely silent and is that what we are after? Does the mute button diminish the joyful natural early childhood noise? I don't have a solution as I realize why students are kept on mute in a large group and I'd like to see opportunities where students can participate in a group without being muted and I wonder about other ways to address this complex issue.

It is also challenging to keep the student in the chair. In many observations, children were leaving to get someone in their home, jump on a bed or play with a pet. Even when the teacher said to come back, the student was sometimes gone for a while. Again, on ground this might look like a child leaving circle time and walking around and being redirected back to the circle. The teacher must rely on the support at home to do this redirection and that changes the teacher-student dynamic. Maybe this is just an issue of control and in a virtual setting the teacher could just ask the child to return when they are ready and be okay with that.

I was surprised at the resources that teachers found online to support the learning. The online bingo cards, the online dice, the online calendars and online stories are just a few examples of resources that teachers found to bring the lesson to the children remotely. The

school sent home materials so the children also had manipulatives and books but if a child was unable to find a physical resource the teachers always had a virtual substitute.

This experience showed me the versatility and creativity it takes to teach and the necessity to be there for the students during all kinds of times. This experience reinforced the role that teachers have with children and the constant source of routine and steadiness that school provides for learners. This experience highlighted the importance of building a community, one that is inclusive of all of the children in the room. I was able to observe how listening to the children's lives outside of school created a different level of comfort for the children remotely. I believe that there is more intention online since people aren't together. The children appeared very invested as many were sitting alone in a room. As a teacher, I will make sure to see all of my students and ask questions and listen carefully to each and every one. COVID-19 and the quick change to remote learning created a situation where both teachers and children were doing their jobs differently than they had done before. I will always look for new and different ways to present material. This was very different from what teachers were used to. Although the content was the same, the teachers needed to find a way to translate their progressive teaching online.

I do wonder about the strengths and challenges of a hybrid classroom. Through my observations, I noticed that the most challenging set up for the teachers was the hybrid classroom, having some students on ground and some online. In these observations, the teachers needed to make sure the virtual students could hear and see what the on ground students were saying and doing and vice versa. I noticed that it was challenging for the remote students to hear their in-person classmates and when the teacher was helping a student on ground, the remote

students were becoming impatient and would sometimes leave. It didn't seem that the remote students were as engaged during these sessions. The benefit of the hybrid classroom is that the remote students get to feel a part of the whole classroom community and when the students come together again after the pandemic they will have had some interaction with one another. Perhaps hybrid situations can be exclusively used for community times. It's also a great option for a child who may need to stay home from school to listen in on a lesson. There is a place for a hybrid classroom and a benefit but all-in-all for remote learning I found it better for children to be fully remote with other remote kids and a dedicated remote teacher.

One of the biggest takeaways was the equity issue and the availability of a partner in real time for early childhood learning. I keep wondering about the child who does not have support at home. I also still have questions about the student-teacher relationship and the parent-teacher relationship. The teacher is able to connect with the child on a social and emotional level but what about the physical needs of the child? A child cannot get the physical safety virtually that they do in person. I wonder about the experience of these children and how future teachers will help navigate some of these frustrations these students may have experienced. This research has brought to light many successes, challenges and questions I noticed and still have with virtual learning. Early childhood educators pivoted to virtual learning during the pandemic and there are important takeaways for current and future teachers and parents.

I am left with one final thought that might make a great topic for further research: In another influential Bank Street course called *Language Acquisition and Learning in a Linguistically Diverse Society*, we spoke a lot about identity. When a child goes to school, there is the opportunity to develop various identities and be with other people who have different

identities. When there is only the influence of the adults at home, what happens to a child's exploration and evolution of their identity?

Resources

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Appendix 1

1st Grade Math

Context: Remote students only

- Does anybody remember working with Cuisenaire rods last year?
- All remote students have Cuisenaire rods in front of them. They were sent home by the school.
- Sienna says she remembers
- Can anyone tell me which rod is worth 1?
- Rya says the white one is worth one.
- How do you know that Rya?
- Because it is one cube
- You guys will now look at the sheet and spend the next 15 minutes coloring in the sheet and putting the value of each rod underneath.
- All children are muted.
- Wesley is focusing
- Davi says I don't understand
- Davi starts to cry and goes to get his parent
- The teacher says they will talk about it more but Davi is gone



|

I think the teacher could give more time to allow the students to engage with the rods before talking about the worksheet. Ask questions about what the students notice about the rods. This lesson does not feel student centered.

Davi is frustrated. He really would have benefited from hearing his classmates talk about the rods and making his own findings. Once the values are placed to the rods, it eliminates the students ability to make their own conclusions.

Appendix 2

Building Community

Bringing Objects from Home

- Sadie is holding her baby doll and says that the baby is now 3 years old today
- Sadie tell the class that the baby calls her Mommy
- Mickey is that your new word search book? Can you tell me a word you found?
- Mickey says, I just found a word in my word search book
- Maddy, a home school child, shows her toy judy, a bunny
- Marcus is telling us he has peecashu
- Nate has a new garage toy and says squirrel ate it
- Dani brings alphabet list and starts writing and saying all of the letters
- Cathy asks what's C, What's B, What's R?
- Maddy, did you bring something to share today?
- Who is that little guy in your hand?what's his name?
- He's from peppa pig
- Beatriz is sharing her dog toy
- Cathy notices Beatriz's dolls boot
- Cathy asks Beatriz to tell her about the boot
- A home object becomes part of the conversation and Cathy makes it student centered by asking children what letters start with from the alphabet chart that Dani brought.

Appendix 3

Consent Document for Research for Principal

I am conducting research for my Integrated Masters' Project. The topic is: How do teachers build a progressive online learning experience for very young children?

I want to observe in PK and 1st classrooms in your school while they are teaching morning meetings and math for ten sessions online.

I will be taking observational notes during each session.

These notes will allow me to examine the methods and strategies that teachers have used to incorporate progressive pedagogy into a virtual platform.

No names will be used in the final research, only the methods used to teach a progressive curriculum. All notes will be destroyed after my work is finished.

I have completed the *Protecting Human Research Participants(PHRP) Online Training*

By signing this document you are agreeing to my observations.

Erica Held, Researcher _____ *Erica Held* _____

Principal name: Joe McCauley

