Teacher Agency as a Route to Adaptive Expertise: Relational, Informed, and Reflective Action

Jennifer Sharples Reichenberg
SUNY Buffalo State, reichejm@buffalostate.edu

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Teacher Agency as a Route to Adaptive Expertise: Relational, Informed, and Reflective Action

Jennifer Sharples Reichenberg, *SUNY Buffalo State College*

--------- **Abstract** ---------

This case study of two fourth-grade teachers explored teachers' literacy instructional practices and perceptions of their professional agency during the hybrid synchronous teaching of the COVID-19 pandemic. In anticipation of the challenges of hybrid synchronous instruction, these teachers combined their classes to co-teach 39 students. Analysis of observation and interview data showed that the co-teachers acted as adaptive experts. They reflected on challenges such as maintaining students' focus, developing rapport, and gaining active participation. Their collaborative reflection informed adaptations to increase students' access to learning by employing multiple modalities, developing community, and enacting inclusive practices. Teachers also supported students' agency by engaging students' voices to encourage participation. Conditions that supported teachers to exercise agency included trust between the teachers and with the administrators, teachers' voices and choices being valued, and the ability to enact their ideas. Findings suggest characteristics of agency that can be leveraged for teachers to enact adaptive expertise.

Keywords: *teacher agency, adaptive expertise, hybrid literacy learning, reflection, co-teaching*

Throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, teaching and learning have taken a variety of forms in schools across the country (International Literacy Association, 2020; Liu et al., 2021). As more children return to the physical space of the classroom, gaps in children's learning have been widely projected and are starting to be documented (Betebenner & Wenning, 2021; International Literacy Association, 2020). However, rather than dwelling on learning loss, some have called for educators to focus on accelerating children's learning, with the understanding that "there can be increasing value and strength following a decline, setback, or adversity" (Fisher et al., 2021, p. 1). They challenge us to reimagine teaching and learning and to "embrace the possibilities that we imagine" (Fisher et al., 2021, p. 3; see also Sailors, 2019).

Efforts to accelerate students' learning as they return to the classroom have prompted discussions of which programs might be adopted, adapted, or implemented with increased fidelity. However, scholars have long noted that, rather than programs, it is teachers who are fundamentally important to the quality of student learning experiences (Darling-Hammond,

1999; Sanders & Horn, 1998). Instead of strictly following scripted programs, effective teachers employ a variety of approaches informed by the needs and learning goals of their students given their unique contexts (Darling-Hammond, 1999; Valli, 1992). Effective teachers continually adapt to changing conditions. This is referred to as *adaptive expertise*, which is the ability of teachers to adjust and respond effectively to unexpected occurrences in teaching and learning. Adaptive expertise has been cited as the gold standard for teaching and is critical to fuel learning acceleration (Bransford et al., 2005; Hayden et al., 2013).

However, in order for teachers to enact adaptive expertise, they must experience the agency to improvise, imagine, and create new realities as conditions change. Teacher agency—the ability to imagine a course of action, consider it, and enact it—has the potential to empower teachers to adapt, informed by continual reflection on their unique circumstances and students. This underscores the critical relationship between teacher agency and the ability to deliver effective instruction, which is relevant for those responsible for preservice and in-service professional learning in a variety of contexts, including teacher educators, administrators, curriculum leaders, and instructional coaches (Reichenberg, 2020).

The International Literacy Association (2020) highlights the great burden the pandemic placed on the literacy learning of children and the urgency of employing approaches to reach all learners, regardless of location. The pandemic also provided an opportunity to study teachers enacting agency as part of effective literacy instruction in unanticipated and challenging conditions. Therefore, the research questions guiding this study are as follows:

1. What is the nature of literacy teaching in one fourth-grade classroom employing hybrid synchronous instruction?

2. What are teachers' perceptions of their professional agency during pandemic instruction?

This case study of one fourth-grade classroom with two co-teachers draws on observational and interview data to explore these questions. Findings show that the teachers, Phyllis and Sarah, engaged in adaptive expertise to create equitable access to literacy learning for their students, whether in the classroom or online, and enacted practices to increase student agency. These findings point to factors that can build teacher agency and adaptive expertise as educators face current challenges, such as accelerating student learning impacted by the pandemic, and future unanticipated challenges.

Review of Literature on Agency

Agency in Education

At its core, agency is the ability to imagine a course of action, consider it, and enact it. Scholars have worked to develop and define the concept of agency with increasing nuance. Lipponen and Kumpulainen (2011) defined agency as "the capacity to initiate purposeful action" and to transform one's situation (p. 812). This definition highlights the importance of the agent choosing a course of action and then acting in the world to make changes that impact the agent's current circumstances. Bandura (2001), too, noted the role of intentionality and influence in agency. Conditions are also key to support

an agent's ability to act. One such condition is the knowledge that the agent's ideas are valued and action is possible. When an agent knows their ideas are valued and that they have the power to act, this encourages agentive thought and action (Lipponen & Kumpulainen, 2011). Another condition that supports agentive action is access to appropriate resources. For example, Charteris et al. (2017) found that the materials available to in-service teachers, such as space, teaching materials, and lighting, impacted their ability to exercise agency. In preservice teacher education, agency was impacted by the relationship between the teacher candidate and the mentor (Edwards & D'Arcy, 2004), which has relevance for in-service teachers who are collaborating through co-teaching.

Agency is also important for students' learning, and the agency of teachers and students is intertwined. Teachers' ability to create agentive experiences for students is impacted by the degree to which they themselves experience agency. Robertson et al. (2020) found that in-service teachers engaged in agentive literacy professional learning experiences provided agentive learning experiences for their students. Drawing on Deci and Ryan (1995), Robertson et al. noted the importance of autonomy, competence, and relatedness in supporting the agency of in-service teachers that extended to students. Similarly, Jones and Charteris (2017) found that a preservice teacher engaged in collective inquiry through discourse emphasizing agency enacted agency in her accompanying fieldwork to increase student ownership of learning. This suggests the potential for the discourse of co-teachers to also support teacher agency that impacts student agency.

Agency as Relational and Temporal

Other scholars have emphasized the relational aspect of agency, which includes the ability to seek out resources and serve as a resource (Edwards & D'Arcy, 2004). Therefore, another critical aspect of agency is collaboration. Emirbayer and Mische (1998) advocated "relational pragmatics," a "temporally embedded process" that accounts for context and factors in the past, present, and future of agents who are in a relationship (p. 963). This is a particularly useful conception when examining agents in completely unexpected and unprecedented situations because it allows us to consider how their past informs their present thinking and actions as well as how their thoughts about the future impact the present. We can explore their "capacity to contextualize past habits and future projects within the contingencies of the moment" (Emirbayer & Mische, 1998, p. 963). Relational and temporal context impact an agent's access to resources and ability to act as a resource for others.

Context, Knowledge, and Expertise in Agentive Literacy Teaching

Teachers possess a combination of contextual knowledge, formed from their current students' needs and school and community culture, knowledge of their content and pedagogy, and expertise gained with experience. Wilkinson (2005) found that teachers combined their experience and knowledge of context to improve literacy outcomes for schools considered to be disadvantaged. Similarly, Ramrathan and Mzimela (2016) showed that teachers exercised agency when teaching a primary-level multi-age class by drawing on their formal knowledge, situational knowledge, and experiential knowledge to make and act on decisions during a home language reading period. Therefore, context, knowledge, and expertise profoundly impact a teacher's ability to exercise agency.

The Role of Reflection in Exercising Agency

Bandura (2001) noted self-reflectiveness as requisite to exercise agency. Jones and Charteris (2017), too, emphasized "agency as an enacted process of critical reflection" (p. 506). Scholars exploring reflection and transformation emphasize the link between reflective thinking and agency. In particular, both Dewey (1933) and Freire (1993) noted the critical way in which reflection informs agentive action. Therefore, it is useful to consider various points at which reflection can take place in relation to the action of teaching. Schön (1983) differentiated between reflection-on-action and reflection-in-action: Reflection-on-action occurs after instruction by looking back, while reflection-in-action consists of thinking done by the teacher while teaching a lesson in response to unexpected conditions. Reflection-on-action then becomes practice for reflection-in-action (Rodgers, 2002). Both types of reflection fuel teachers' ability to make adjustments in the moment and enact adaptive expertise.

Adaptive Expertise

Reflecting on teaching and learning builds teachers' capacity to engage in adaptive expertise—that is, the ability to respond effectively to unexpected occurrences while teaching (Bransford et al., 2005; Hayden et al., 2013). The skills, knowledge, and dispositions that contribute to adaptive expertise develop throughout a teacher's experiences as a student, a preservice teacher, and then an in-service teacher (Lortie, 2002). Adaptive expertise is the "gold standard for becoming a professional" because adaptive experts are in a continual state of refining their practice in real time, informed by their knowledge, expertise, and context and often in collaboration with others (Hammerness et al., 2005, p. 360). One study of adaptive expertise showed that adaptive experts are better able to focus on student learning as a measure of success rather than teaching performance (Hayden et al., 2013). This article explores the conditions that supported two experienced teachers to collaboratively imagine, enact, and reflect on the evolving needs of their students and enact adaptive expertise.

Methods

Research Design

A qualitative intrinsic case study design represents an "unusual or unique situation" (Creswell & Poth, 2018, p. 99). Case studies have been used to explore teacher agency in STEM education (Balgopal, 2020), language education (Kayi-Aydar, 2019), and reading education (Ramrathan & Mzimela, 2016). Case studies are bounded, center on a particular situation, are descriptive, and enrich understanding through an inductive process (Mallette & Duke, 2021). This case study centers on the experiences of two co-teachers in one fourth-grade classroom from March 2020 to March 2021. I employed interviews and observations to collect data in this study, and case studies are well suited to integrate these types of data (Yin, 2009). Interviews are effective for gathering data about how participants interpret their experiences and make sense of them. Observations add depth to interviews to show participants in action within the context of the study and provide an opportunity for triangulation.

Participants and Context

This study took place in a small rural school district in the northeastern United States covering about 76 square miles. The district serves just over 700 students, with 88% identifying as White, 9% as Hispanic or Latino, and 3% as multiracial. Fifty-one percent of the students are considered economically disadvantaged, with 3% of students

having migrant status.

The participants in this study, Phyllis and Sarah, were fourth-grade teachers in this school district, each with 22 years of teaching experience. They had been friends since the age of 10. Phyllis had graduated from a state university and, after a 6-month long-term substitute position, was hired by the school district in which this study took place. She had taught 1 year of fifth grade, 1 year of academic intervention services, and 20 years of fourth grade. During most of Phyllis's time teaching fourth grade, she was also the inclusion teacher, which meant that children receiving special education services mainly in the general education classroom were placed in her room and she collaborated with special education teachers. Sarah had graduated from a different state university. She had taught for 1 year out of state, trained as a Reading Recovery teacher, and then was hired by the school district in which this study took place. Here, she had taught fourth grade for 18 years, with the other years in fifth and sixth grades. She also spent a year creating a reading program for the sixth grade.

While these two teachers had collaborated informally for almost 20 years, during the 2020–2021 school year, they co-taught fourth grade for the first time and used a hybrid approach for the entire school day and all subjects. The decision to co-teach was developed, proposed, and enacted by Phyllis and Sarah in response to their collaborative reflection on the coming school year and anticipated impact of the ongoing pandemic on their instruction. Phyllis and Sarah explained that the district sent out a survey about the 2020–2021 school year to solicit feedback from stakeholders. Based on this survey, a hybrid model was chosen by the district in which some students would be online and others would be in the classroom during synchronous instruction 4 days each week. Teachers were given latitude to design their approaches and schedules.

Phyllis and Sarah asked district administrators for permission to combine their two classes into one larger class so that they could work together to implement the hybrid model. Administration granted permission and assigned the teachers and students to a larger classroom not currently in use. Their combined class contained 39 students, 13 of whom opted to stay fully online (cohort C) and 26 of whom alternated coming to school in person with attending online (cohorts A and B). Phyllis and Sarah provided synchronous instruction from the classroom in person on Mondays and Tuesdays for cohort A with cohorts B and C online and in person on Thursdays and Fridays for cohort B with cohorts A and C online. Wednesdays were set aside for online extra help and office hours, and no students came to school in person.

Phyllis and Sarah were given freedom by the administration to design their instructional approaches and decided to position one teacher at the front of the in-person students and one teacher at the computer in order to try to meet all the children's needs. During instruction, the teacher who sat at the computer attended to the chat and interacted mainly with the children online. This teacher voiced student comments, answers, and questions from the chat aloud for all to hear, typed in the chat, engaged in technology troubleshooting with children online, and spoke directly to the children online when needed. This teacher also attended to engagement issues with online students. The other teacher stood at the front of the in-person class and in front of a second computer and camera. This teacher led the lesson, manipulated the computer and camera to display materials simultaneously to children online and in the room on the projector, and called on children in the room.

Data

Data include interviews and observations of classroom literacy instruction from February and March 2021. I focused on literacy instruction to narrow the study to one discipline and because this is my area of expertise, allowing me the potential to gain greater insights into instructional reasoning and adaptations. I utilized Seidman's (2019) three-interview series approach. One initial interview was conducted with each teacher separately about their experiences from March through June 2020. This was followed by two joint interviews. The second interview focused on the experience of planning for and implementing hybrid synchronous English language arts instruction while co-teaching from July through September 2020. The third interview focused on the ongoing adaptations that occurred as conditions changed and the meaning the teachers made from this experience, with an emphasis on their perception of their own agency in the process. This interview occurred at the end of March 2021. Seidman called this "reflection on the meaning" of experience (p. 22). Interviews took place through a digital platform, were audio-recorded, and then were transcribed. Each of the four interviews was 30 minutes long, for a total of 2 hours of interview audio.

Two observations of English language arts instruction, each lasting 1 hour and 20 minutes, took place through Google Meet so that I experienced online instruction as the online students did. I had previously visited this classroom in person as part of supervision of a teacher candidate, but this observation was not included in the study data because the study had not yet been initiated. While I observed, I took field notes and wrote analytic notes to record my thoughts as I was observing and immediately after (Glesne, 2014).

Trustworthiness

I brought 23 years of experience working in schools to the study. This includes experience as a primary school literacy specialist, literacy coach, and literacy consultant in rural, suburban, and urban schools from prekindergarten through Grade 12. I also have 13 years of experience teaching college, including three semesters of hybrid synchronous instruction. Triangulation of data occurred through multiple interviews and observations (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). For example, teachers identified the challenge of honoring the voices of all students in their interviews, and I noticed them working to honor the voices of all students during the classroom observations. In addition, I engaged in member checking to ensure that my interpretations accurately reflected the participants' experiences (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The participants provided feedback on and confirmed findings. I also shared analysis and findings with colleagues, who were literacy researchers and professors at different state universities, through a state conference presentation and received critical feedback, such as requesting more detail about methods, which is incorporated into this article (Samaras & Freese, 2009).

Analysis

I began data analysis while gathering data by writing analytic notes to record my initial thoughts and impressions (Glesne, 2014). One example of a memo I wrote during an observation is "students' online comments being pulled into the classroom conversation by teacher-student voice." After the data set was complete, I read all data, guided by my research questions, and engaged in initial inductive coding (Saldaña, 2021).

Analysis of Data for Research Question 1

To answer the first research question about the nature of the hybrid literacy instruction, I inductively looked for commonalities in comments by teachers and observational data regarding the nature of literacy instruction. I applied the constant comparative method in which tentative codes are derived and adjusted as the data are read (Glaser & Strauss, 1967/2017). During first-round coding for Research Question 1, I discovered two broad categories: *challenges* of hybrid instruction identified by teachers and teachers' *adaptations* to address challenges (see Figure 1).
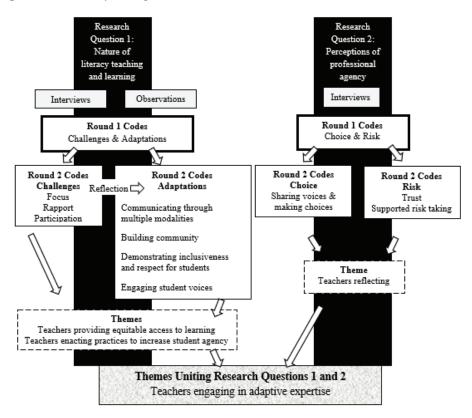
Figure 1. *Data Analysis Steps*

Second-round coding identified subcodes in each of these categories (Saldaña, 2021). Challenges included the subcodes of students maintaining *focus*, developing *rapport* with students online, and having all students *participate*. Reflection informed teachers' adaptations to address these challenges. Adaptations included the subcodes of using *multiple modalities* to engage students, building *community*, demonstrating *inclusiveness and respect* for students, and engaging *student voices*. I then recoded the entire data set with these codes (Rubin & Rubin, 1994). Finally, looking across subcodes, I discovered two themes: teachers providing *equitable access to learning* and teachers enacting *practices to increase student agency*.

Analysis of Data for Research Question 2

To answer the second research question about the teachers' perceptions of their agency, I inductively looked for commonalities in comments by teachers. Specifically, I examined their perceptions of their agency and examples. I once again applied the constant comparative method. During first-round coding for Research Question 2, I noticed the two broad categories of *choice* and *risk*.

During second-round coding, I expanded these categories to include the subcodes of *sharing voices and making choices*, *trust*, and *enacting supported risk taking*. The theme among these subcodes was *teachers reflecting*. Finally, I looked at the possible relationships between the themes associated with each research question. This revealed the unifying theme of *adaptive expertise*. In what follows, I show how Phyllis and Sarah enacted adaptive expertise to increase equitable access to literacy instruction and support students' agency.

Findings

First, I explore the nature of the hybrid literacy instruction provided by Phyllis and Sarah through their perceptions of challenges they faced and how they reflected on and adapted to these challenges. This analysis shows that Phyllis and Sarah engaged in reflection to inform adaptations that provided equitable access to learning and enacted practices to increase student agency. I then share Phyllis's and Sarah's perceptions of their own agency as teachers and how this agency supported their ability to act as adaptive experts.

Research Question 1: What is the nature of literacy teaching in one fourth-grade classroom employing hybrid synchronous instruction?

Providing Equitable Access to Learning

Classroom observations and interviews revealed that Phyllis and Sarah reflected on challenges in order to inform adaptations to create equitable access to literacy learning for their students, whether in the classroom or online. Glazewski and Ertmer (2020) defined equitable access as "pedagogical considerations and moves that establish the necessary conditions likely to diminish existing pedagogical gaps" (p. 684). Pedagogical gaps between students learning online and in the classroom were common during pandemic instruction (Hough et al., 2020; International Literacy Association, 2020). Online, students worked in a variety of environments ranging from homes with supervision to supervised daycare settings. Support in these environments varied. In addition, students in the classroom experienced school differently from students who were online. Phyllis and Sarah engaged in reflection to inform adaptations intended to decrease these pedagogical gaps.

Communicating through multiple modalities to improve focus. When asked about the biggest challenge of hybrid teaching and learning, Phyllis and Sarah answered almost simultaneously: "Focus." Sarah elaborated, "A lot of them have siblings at home at the same time they have other things at home." They explained that children were often distracted by extraneous movement and noise in their online learning spaces, leading them to miss out on crucial information. The International Literacy Association (2020)

also noted student engagement as a major challenge. When reflecting on this challenge, Sarah explained that they realized they had to use approaches to engage the children at home to make sure "they are all receiving the same instruction." They noticed that "the cohort A and B kids [those who attend in person twice a week] ultimately benefit more than the fully remote." To increase equity of access, Phyllis and Sarah had to imagine techniques to more fully engage the students online. Sarah characterized this rapid reflection and adjustment as "learning how to fly the airplane at the same time you're flying."

To respond to students' difficulty focusing, Phyllis and Sarah made several adaptations. Almost continuously, they provided information to students online in multiple modalities. Answers spoken by students in the room were also typed into the chat box by the teacher monitoring the online students. The same was done with directions spoken by the teacher leading the lesson. This supported students who might have had a poor internet connection. Even if the audio connection cut out briefly, students still had access to the information in the chat box. For example, one week, the students were working on a riddle with multiple cumulative clues. As the final clue was revealed, Phyllis simultaneously read it aloud and held it up to the camera. Children then had the opportunity to answer the riddle privately in the chat box. These practices improved access to information for all children.

Building community to develop rapport. Sarah also noted the difficulty in building rapport with the children in cohort C, those who always attended online. Rapport with a teacher increases equitable access to learning because that relationship can inform a teacher's approach with a particular student or empower a student to feel more at ease with a teacher. Sarah explained, "For us, the kids who physically come to school—you have a different rapport with them, even if they're only there 2 days a week, versus the ones who have never been in school with us. We've never met in person." Phyllis and Sarah agreed that the students, in general, learned better when they were physically present in the classroom with them for at least part of the week. This observation is reinforced by research that shows the importance of strong relationships in student learning success (Fisher et al., 2021).

Phyllis and Sarah worked to create one community out of their 39 shared fourth-grade students. One of the first changes they made was to expect the fully online students (cohort C) to attend synchronously online more hours in the school day, rather than completing independent work. Phyllis noted, "And then we just tried to build from that based on the kids' needs. So we have slowly changed our schedule so they were [logging] in more often for meetings." This meant more opportunity to develop rapport through more contact with those students.

As online students logged on for the day, they greeted the teachers in the chat box. The teacher facilitating the online computer responded verbally, which allowed all the students and the co-teacher to know which of their classmates were sending greetings. Throughout lessons, these co-teachers often facilitated interweaving the comments of children in the classroom and online. In this example, Sarah led writing instruction about creating a strong conclusion to a writing piece. She mentioned that a conclusion should refer back to the thesis.

> Student in the classroom: "What's a thesis?"
>
> Sarah: "Good question. I was waiting for that."
>
> Student online raises her hand. Sarah calls on her.
>
> Student online: "The main idea of it."

This example illustrates the ease with which the children in both locations could hear and respond to one another throughout the lessons. Phyllis and Sarah drew on their context, experience, and knowledge to reflect and engage in the adaptive expertise necessary to increase equitable access for learners.

Demonstrating inclusiveness and respect for students to develop rapport. Phyllis and Sarah communicated inclusiveness and respect for all students in the seemingly small adaptations they made about how to deliver instruction. For example, when a student in the classroom was called on to read aloud, they invited that student to come up to the microphone so the students at home could hear more clearly. When a lesson required students to read from a projected screen, Phyllis did not simply point her camera at the screen. She shared her screen with the students online for best viewing. In this same lesson, she asked Sarah about an online student she knew was having trouble keeping up with the writing required during the lesson. She asked Sarah, "How is [student] doing with catching up?" This shows the teachers were simultaneously tuned into the individual students' needs in the classroom and online.

The teachers similarly demonstrated respect for the learning of all students regarding access to learning experiences and materials. Sarah explained that if they avoided hands-on activities, such as science experiments, because they would be difficult for students online, all students would miss out "on those hands-on kinds of things." Therefore, Phyllis and Sarah began having science materials delivered to children's homes so they could participate in experiments along with children in the classroom. This is an example of reflection-on-action (Schön, 1983) because Phyllis and Sarah used their experience with hands-on activities during hybrid learning to inform their future pedagogical decisions.

Adaptations to support the learning of students also took place during lessons, demonstrating reflection-in-action. Sometimes effective hybrid teaching meant that in-classroom students and online students needed separate learning spaces due to the nature of the activity. During a science lesson, students were experimenting with batteries and lightbulbs. The children online had the materials in their homes, but the teachers found that the online interaction was distracting to the children in the room, who were also working with materials. Therefore, Phyllis took the students who were in school to a separate room to work, showing the impact of access to materials on agency (Charteris et al., 2017). These adaptations increased access to learning for all students by giving them access to information and activities.

Building Student Agency

Classroom observations and interviews also showed that Phyllis and Sarah worked to increase student agency during literacy learning, whether in the classroom or online. Fisher et al. (2021) pointed out that "agency is central to a positive relationship to learning" (p. 43). During online instruction, many students were expected to learn in a home environment more commonly associated with sleeping, eating, and relaxing (Fisher et al., 2021). Fisher and colleagues note that students who lacked the skills of agency were most likely to suffer during pandemic instruction. Just showing up online is not usually sufficient for a learner to benefit from instruction, and online students did not have access to physical proximity reminders from teachers (Avery et al., 2021). Phyllis and Sarah engaged in reflection to inform adaptations that increased student agency in the classroom and online.

Engaging student voices to encourage participation. The teachers identified participation of online students as a major challenge. Phyllis explained, "The other thing that's hard, I think, is them feeling like they participate." Student voice is another key component of student agency (Fisher et al., 2021). Just as teachers in classrooms try to draw in all student voices, Phyllis and Sarah valued hearing from all students. With 39 students, two thirds of whom were online at any given time, it was challenging to balance those who continuously volunteered to participate with those who rarely did. Phyllis continued, "The same kids will say over and over again, 'I have the answer,' so we try to call on them and we try to let others answer." Sarah elaborated, "You have a portion of the kids at home who aren't doing anything, so you try to call on them just to pull them back in."

Phyllis and Sarah engaged in practices to increase student voice during literacy instruction as well. One practice that supported student voice was reading aloud student comments from the chat. Just as students in the classroom may contribute spontaneously to a class discussion, students online could contribute spontaneously in the chat. The teacher sitting at the online computer read many, but not all, comments aloud to the class, as appropriate, in real time. Therefore, instead of a typical process by which online students might raise their hands to talk, wait to be noticed, be called on, unmute, and then speak, the process simulated everyone being in the classroom together. Phyllis explained this process:

> Usually whoever's in charge of the chat tries to recap a lot of the main points in the chat or even ask more questions. . . . Sometimes it's a question that we might notice come up in the chat. If we're in charge of the chat, we will raise our hand like to be the kids raising their hand asking a question. . . . It's hard to make sure those kids at home are really engaged.

This comment illustrates reflection-in-action (Schön, 1983) that Phyllis engaged in as she interacted with the children online to determine which points to recap and which comments to read aloud.

Another practice that gave students voice was when the teachers specifically invited online students into the discussion. For example, Sarah asked, "Are there friends at home that have questions?" Phyllis, monitoring the chat, then read out students' questions. Other times, students in both locations were invited to answer: "Who can tell me—

either in class or at home—what kind of writing have we been doing?" When an online student responded in the chat, Sarah invited him to unmute and expand on his answer, an instructional practice that supports children's comprehension.

> Online student in the chat: "Informational writing."

> Sarah: "Could you unmute and explain that?"

This practice served to potentially increase students' sense of self-efficacy, the belief that one can achieve goals, which is a fundamental component of student agency (Zeiser et al., 2018). In this case, the simple goal was to be heard by classmates and contribute to the discussion. Teachers also valued students' ability to communicate nonverbally. They asked students to turn off backlighting so their faces could be visible, allowing for online students' facial expressions to convey the full meaning of their spoken messages. Adaptive expertise enacted by Phyllis and Sarah increased both equitable access to learning and student agency. In the section that follows, I explain these teachers' perceptions of their own agency that supported their ability to enact the adaptive expertise outlined above.

Research Question 2: What are teachers' perceptions of their professional agency during pandemic instruction?

Phyllis and Sarah identified important challenges of hybrid synchronous instruction and adapted to them quickly and thoughtfully to work toward equitable access to learning and student agency. When asked what they are most proud of, they echoed one another: "The kids are learning." Their perception that the students were learning is linked to their instructional decisions before and during this unusual school year. They exercised their agency by engaging in collaborative reflection to imagine and act on adaptations to support their learners throughout the year. This agency was supported and encouraged by a variety of factors: being invited to share their voices and make choices about instruction, being trusted by and demonstrating trust in their administration and one another, and being supported to take risks in enacting their vision for providing equitable access to instruction and increasing student agency.

Sharing Voices and Making Choices

As noted earlier, the district sent out a survey about the 2020–2021 school year to solicit feedback from stakeholders. Based on this survey, a hybrid model was chosen in which some students would be online and others would be in the classroom during synchronous instruction 4 days each week. Teachers were given latitude to design their approaches and schedules.

Phyllis and Sarah credit that invitation with their ability to think creatively about combining their two classes into one to co-teach. Phyllis explained, "We went to our principal and asked if we could try to be creative and get a bigger space so we could at least work together. . . . Our principal was very supportive of that." The teachers' rationale for this request was a concern for equitable access to learning. Phyllis said, "We didn't know how we would really manage both groups fairly."

A former prekindergarten classroom space, larger than an average classroom, was available, which allowed children to be properly spaced when in the classroom.

Since the room had not been used during the previous school year, it was cluttered. The teachers credit the custodians with getting it ready quickly.

Once the space was secured for the classroom, Phyllis and Sarah began planning based on students' needs. One of those needs, explained earlier, was helping students who were being taught fully online to focus. The teachers found that the students being taught fully online were better able to focus on school when they were synchronous. Therefore, the teachers changed their schedule to include more synchronous online meetings and less independent work.

Phyllis explained that, of all the subjects they taught online, "writing is probably the most difficult, especially because it is hard to see what they are doing at home." One specific change they made was to add more synchronous writing instruction because the teachers discovered that all of their students needed additional writing support to meet grade-level expectations. In describing the writing of all the fourth-grade students in their combined class, Sarah explained, "We wanted to really do more writing. . . . Their writing is incredibly, incredibly weak—sentence structure, paragraphing." More synchronous writing time gave the teachers greater opportunity to offer students feedback, which is so critical to the growth of young writers.

In conclusion, Sarah added, "And they were pretty wide open with letting us do it the way we wanted to do it." She appreciated "having the freedom to feel like my choices are . . . respected by administration, and [being] given that freedom to do that." Phyllis agreed: "The freedom of the administration to let us kind of design what we want to do has been helpful."

Trust

Phyllis and Sarah identified trust as foundational to their ability to make adaptations. Sarah explained, "We have to trust each other," and Phyllis elaborated that their trust in one another supported their ability to be flexible to respond to changing circumstances and new information about what was working and what was not. She noted, "We had to be willing to be flexible. We've been constantly changing. There's no way we could have done this if we weren't willing to be flexible with one another and with the kids." Phyllis and Sarah had been friends since the age of 10, and Sarah described their relationship by saying, "We're really family." With this longtime friendship came the ability to be honest without hurting one another's feelings. She added, "We have this relationship where we can say to one another, 'You know, nope, that's not working' . . . and not offend one another."

Trust by the administration in the expertise of the teachers was also critical. Phyllis and Sarah credited administrators with recognizing and respecting their expertise as fourth-grade teachers. Phyllis said that knowing "the expectations of fourth graders" was important as they planned, and Sarah added that administrators recognized their experience as "veteran teachers." Phyllis continued,

> I think part of it is because of our experience with fourth grade and, even though our administrators are fairly new to the district, they still have seen us and know, and I feel like they have faith in us that we're going to work for the needs of the kids.

She summed it up by adding, "I think our administration trusts the two of us to do what is best for our students."

Enacting Supported Risk Taking

In addition to soliciting teachers' voices and allowing them to make choices, the administration supported risk taking by teachers to design effective instruction. Sarah explained:

> A lot of them think outside the box. And so they encourage you to think outside the box. So I think that if you're doing what you're supposed to be doing, they're going to support you in any way they can to encourage you to do something different. I think a lot of them . . . let us try different things without saying, 'No, that's not going to work.'

Balgopal's (2020) case study of teacher agency and curricular reform identified supported risk taking as a critical component of exercising professional agency. Teachers who know they can take calculated risks without fear of punishment from administration experience agency that is informed by their expertise and inspired by imagination and innovation.

Discussion

Based on 22 years of experience teaching and deep knowledge of their curriculum and rural community, Phyllis and Sarah collaboratively innovated to combine their fourth-grade classes for hybrid instruction. They enacted a plan for instruction conceived before the school year began, and they continually adjusted based on their knowledge, expertise, context, and the changing needs of students. Through ongoing reflection, they engaged in adaptive expertise to increase equity of access to learning and student agency, both issues identified in the research as critically important to student success during pandemic hybrid and online learning (Avery et al., 2021).

Adaptive expertise is characterized by a balance between innovation and efficiency (Hammerness et al., 2005). In other words, adaptive experts must imagine new possibilities, yet do so in a timely manner to make their resulting adaptations effective and relevant. Phyllis and Sarah imagined possibilities and responded quickly to their students' needs. As a result, they perceived that "the kids are learning" and the administration invited them to continue their co-teaching model of one larger combined class, adapted for nonpandemic instruction, into the 2021–2022 school year, during which it was anticipated that all children would be present in the school building. This study has the potential to inform those tasked with pre- and in-service professional learning about the nature of teachers' agency as it relates to enacting adaptive expertise. Specifically, this research points to agency as relational, as decision making informed by expertise, and as temporally informed reflection.

Agency as Relational

Collaboration was at the core of the agentive actions of these participants. Phyllis and Sarah had collaborated with one another as fourth-grade teachers for almost 20 years prior to the pandemic. During those 20 years, these two teachers learned to trust each other professionally while making curricular decisions, discussing student issues, interacting with new administrators, and working with families. In many cases, the

pandemic brought increased physical isolation to teachers, making professional collaboration and social interaction more challenging. Seeking to overcome this isolation, Phyllis and Sarah drew on their collaborative history to imagine a way they could co-teach their students more effectively together. Effective professional learning is most often collaborative (Harnett, 2012; Thibodeau, 2008; Vanderburg & Stephens, 2010), and Phyllis and Sarah were engaging in professional learning as they designed, analyzed, and adjusted their approaches together. In addition, agency includes the ability to seek out resources and to be a resource for others (Edwards & D'Arcy, 2004). These two teachers became resources for one another as they planned and taught together on a daily basis.

Agency as Decision Making Informed by Knowledge and Expertise

The decisions Phyllis and Sarah enacted were also informed by deep knowledge of and expertise with the fourth-grade curriculum and with their student population. They credited this knowledge and expertise with building the trust the administrators exhibited in supporting their ideas. They drew on this knowledge base when designing, implementing, reflecting on, and adjusting instruction, mirroring Wilkinson's (2005) finding that teachers used experience, context, and knowledge to form theories that informed their decision making. Similarly, Ramrathan and Mzimela (2016) found that teachers exercised agency when teaching by drawing on their formal knowledge, situational knowledge, and experiential knowledge to make and act on decisions. Therefore, recognizing, honoring, and applying knowledge and expertise impact a teacher's ability to exercise agency.

Agency as Temporally Informed Reflection Linked to Action

The adaptations implemented by Phyllis and Sarah were unique to the situation of teaching 39 fourth-grade students in a rural location who were a mixture of hybrid and fully online participants during an unprecedented pandemic. These approaches also changed, almost continuously, in response to the reflection that Phyllis and Sarah engaged in on a regular basis. This reflection was informed by their past experiences, both before and during the pandemic. It was also informed by anticipation of future events, including emerging from pandemic instruction at some point and the current needs of students as they unfolded in real time. For this reason, reflection and agency are best understood as temporally informed.

As noted earlier, Schön (1983) contended that reflection could take place at various points in time. Reflection-on-action was apparent when Phyllis and Sarah used their experiences early in the school year to determine that they needed to add more synchronous instructional time for students online. It also occurred when they added more time for writing, realizing how difficult it was for children to get feedback on their writing in an online environment. Reflection-in-action occurred on a daily basis when Phyllis and Sarah made adjustments in the midst of instruction, such as moving the in-person students to a different room during the science lab using batteries and lightbulbs.

Thompson and Pascal (2012) elaborated to include reflection-for-action, which is characterized by thinking through more than one way to enact a future lesson and the possible outcomes of different approaches. It also involves anticipating possible student responses, misconceptions, and confusion and planning anticipatory or responsive action. Reflection-for-action occurred before the school year began, when Phyllis and Sarah envisioned co-taught hybrid synchronous instruction. It also occurred when they planned

instructional adaptations, such as sending home science lab materials for the online children. Dewey (1933) made a strong link between reflection-for-action and reflection-on-action. He pointed out that, while reflective thought involves thinking ahead, this thinking ahead is dependent on past experience. Rodgers (2002) reminded us that reflection-on-action and reflection-for-action support reflective thought when in-action. Thus, reflection connects all stages of the teaching process recursively and supports enacting adaptive expertise.

Adaptive Expertise

Central to these types of reflection is the ability to take action based on contextual information. Context included the teachers' knowledge of the specific children and families with whom they worked, knowledge of the fourth-grade curriculum, knowledge of fourth-grade students' needs in general, and knowledge of an administrative climate that encouraged innovation and risk taking. These teachers exercised agency to take action in response to that context. Therefore, conditions in this district gave them the ability to exercise their agency. Action fed a continuous loop of reflection as Phyllis and Sarah adjusted instructional approaches throughout the year. Hayden et al. (2013) noted that this reflective loop linked to action is the critical marker of adaptive expertise, explaining that "the result is more responsive and dynamic teaching," which is "especially critical for helping students who have been underserved by schools" (p. 398). Not bound by adhering strictly to an imposed instructional schedule, Phyllis and Sarah were free to adjust and revise to meet the needs of their students as they evolved throughout the school year.

Implications, Limitations, and Future Research

In this study, collaborative reflection-for-action, in-action, and on-action supported teachers to anticipate, innovate, and respond to the evolving needs of their students and conditions, building on their existing expertise to meet previously unforeseen challenges. This study can inform stakeholders' approaches to the role of teacher agency in professional decision making. Building on teachers' expertise and knowledge of their unique instructional contexts, administrators can "promote a professional learning culture where agency is valued as part of the learning process" (Robertson et al., 2020, p. 197). As educators seek approaches to accelerate student learning in response to the pandemic, capitalizing on teacher agency is an important consideration and is a critical component of enacting adaptive expertise.

This study is limited by the fact that it explored a single case of two co-teachers in one rural district. Future research should examine the role of teacher agency in other contexts. Additionally, this case explored a context that was supportive of teacher agency. Subsequent studies could look at less supportive environments to examine how teachers exercise agency when context-informed decision making, teacher expertise, and risk taking are not readily supported. Additional research could also examine data from administrators' perspectives on the role of teacher agency and the relationship to student learning outcomes.

Conclusion

As the educational community works to accelerate student learning in the wake of the pandemic, this study highlights the role of teachers' agency and adaptive expertise

in that process. Rather than looking to the next program as the solution to close the gap, findings point to the power of agency characterized by trust, voice, choice, and risk taking for teachers and students alike. Teachers in this study showed the importance of relationship with one another, their administrators, and their students in their enactment of agency. They illustrated the role of their knowledge, expertise, and continual reflection in their ability to imagine, innovate, and adjust, ultimately demonstrating adaptive expertise.

About the Author

Jennifer Sharples Reichenberg, PhD, is an assistant professor of education at SUNY Buffalo State College, where she teaches undergraduate and graduate courses in literacy. Her research focuses on teacher agency, reflection, and literacy coaching. She has experience as a literacy specialist, coach, and consultant from prekindergarten through Grade 12. She is a Reading Hall of Fame Emerging Scholars Fellow and a recipient of the Literacy Research Association's Student Outstanding Research Award.

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