S4B

FOCUS GROUP

RESEARCH

REPORT

Bulgaria

S4B PROJECT - DIGITAL SOFT SKILLS FOR BLENDED LEARNING

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Introduction

The Bulgarian focus group was organized on 27th January 2022 in Sofia, Bulgaria, in the premises of 145th School. The event primary objective was to collect comprehensive insights into the prevailing dynamics of the teaching/learning process in Bulgaria, with a special emphasis on the challenges and opportunities posed by the ongoing pandemic and the shift to distance and hybrid education. Engaging a diverse cross-section of educational professionals, the focus group comprised 12 participants – teachers, educators and school staff.

Methodology and participants profile

Instrument development and implementation

The discussion was guided by a previously structured set of questions and discussion topics. The questions were designed to prompt discussion and reflection on various aspects of the teaching experience, particularly in the context of the pandemic and distance learning and the needed preparation and skills needed for successful managing the new educational reality.

Focus group details

Date: 27th January 2022
Location: 145th School, Sofia (Bulgaria)
Duration: ~2.5 hours

Participants' profile

Participants were selected based on their experience and expertise in education. The group comprised teachers from primary, lower secondary educational level, school administrative and management staff. A total of 12 participants took part in the focus group.

Discussion results

Opening questions

Q: What do you love most about the teaching profession?
Several participants expressed their passion for witnessing students' growth and development, as well as the satisfaction derived from imparting knowledge.

Q: What positive aspects of remote or hybrid classes have enhanced your professional skills?
Flexibility in teaching methods and the integration of digital tools were seen as significant advantages. Creative approaches to teaching emerged as a positive aspect of remote and hybrid classes.

Q: What are the biggest challenges in online teaching and how do you overcome them?

Many teachers expressed concerns about maintaining the same level of engagement and motivation among students in an online setting. They noted that distractions at home and the absence of direct supervision make it more challenging to keep students focused. Building a personal connection with students in an online environment was seen as more difficult. Some teachers found it challenging to establish the same level of trust and rapport they would in a physical classroom.

Participants also highlighted varying degrees of digital literacy among students. Some students struggled with the technical aspects of online learning platforms, which could lead to frustration and hinder their learning progress.

A common challenge was the absence of face-to-face interaction. Teachers noted that they were unable to pick up on non-verbal cues or provide immediate support to struggling students, which they found essential in traditional classrooms.

In order to address these challenges, teachers employed various strategies and interactive activities such as virtual polls, breakout rooms for group discussions, and online quizzes to keep students actively involved.

Many teachers provided additional resources and tutorials for students struggling with technology. They also encouraged peer support, creating a collaborative learning environment.

Teachers emphasized the importance of clear and consistent communication with students. They utilized various communication channels, including emails, messaging platforms, and video calls, to ensure students were informed about assignments and expectations.

Teachers integrated multimedia elements like videos, interactive presentations, and multimedia assignments to diversify the learning experience and cater to different learning styles.

Some educators scheduled regular one-on-one or small group check-ins with students to provide individualized support and monitor their progress.

Teachers found it important to set clear and achievable expectations for both themselves and their students. This included providing detailed instructions for assignments and being understanding of individual circumstances.

Transition questions

Q: How comfortable are you with using distance learning technology?
Proficiency in using distance learning technology varied among participants, with some expressing high proficiency, while others acknowledged the need for improvement. Some teachers expressed their concern that digitalization and technology is ascending too fast and have a negative impact on children and adolescents. Therefore, some educators are reluctant to use technology in their teaching.
Strategies for improvement included seeking peer support and self-guided learning.

Q: What comes to mind when you hear "soft skills"?
Participants associated soft skills with communication, adaptability, problem solving and empathy. "Soft digital skills" were linked to proficiency in using digital tools and technology for teaching.

Q: How did you feel when you first had to manage an online learning process?

Responses ranged from initial apprehension to excitement. The first steps taken included exploring online platforms and adapting curriculum for digital delivery. However some teachers were definitely more open and excited to do this than others who found it very difficult, stressful and with a negative impact on the learning.

Key questions

Q: How has the current learning model affected your well-being, confidence, and productivity?
Some noted increased stress levels, while others appreciated the flexibility. Strategies for maintaining well-being included setting boundaries and seeking peer support.

Q: How confident are you in providing effective instruction in the current model?
Confidence levels varied, with some expressing high assurance, while others acknowledged the need for further training and resources.

Q: Have you actively sought opportunities for professional growth?
Many participants engaged in self-improvement through webinars, online courses, and collaborative learning communities.

Q: What skills do you believe teachers need to enhance their professional competencies in the context of distance learning?
In the context of distance learning, educators identified a range of skills they believe are vital for enhancing professional competencies:
Problem solving: Teachers highlighted the need for effective problem-solving skills. They emphasized the importance of quickly identifying and resolving technical issues, adapting lesson plans to suit online platforms, and finding creative solutions to engage and support students.
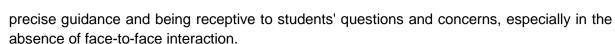Patience: Participants stressed the significance of patience, particularly in an online environment where challenges and technical difficulties may arise. They acknowledged the necessity of providing additional guidance and support to students who may be struggling to navigate the digital learning landscape.
Creativity: Many educators highlighted creativity as a cornerstone skill in distance learning. They expressed the importance of designing innovative and interactive lessons that captivate students' attention, utilizing a variety of digital tools and resources to create dynamic learning experiences.
Teamwork: Teachers recognized the value of collaboration, not only with their colleagues but also with parents and caregivers. They emphasized the need for effective communication and cooperation to ensure that students receive comprehensive support both in and outside of the virtual classroom.
Adaptability: The dynamic nature of online learning requires educators to be adaptable and open to change. Teachers emphasized the need to swiftly adjust teaching methods, lesson plans, and assessments based on student needs and evolving circumstances.

Communication: Effective communication emerged as a critical skill, encompassing both clear articulation of instructions and active listening. Teachers stressed the importance of providing

precise guidance and being receptive to students' questions and concerns, especially in the absence of face-to-face interaction.

Empathy: Educators emphasized the significance of empathy in understanding and addressing the diverse needs of students. They highlighted the need to be attuned to students' emotional well-being, providing a supportive and inclusive learning environment.

Technical proficiency: While soft skills were prioritized, teachers recognized the essential role of technical proficiency. They emphasized the need to be proficient in navigating digital platforms, utilizing educational software, and troubleshooting technical issues to facilitate seamless online learning experiences.

Motivation and resilience: Participants acknowledged the importance of staying motivated and resilient in the face of challenges. They highlighted the need to maintain enthusiasm for teaching, even in a virtual setting, and to inspire and motivate students to stay engaged and committed to their learning journey.

In summary, educators emphasized a holistic approach to professional development, recognizing the equal importance of soft skills, technical proficiency, and a positive mindset in ensuring effective distance learning experiences for both teachers and students. They expressed a commitment to continually honing these competencies to meet the evolving demands of the digital education landscape.

List of the 12 most important digital soft skills as seen by the focus group participants (chosen from the initial list):
1. Innovation
2. Effective communication
3. Flexibility
4. Adaptability
5. Problem solving
6. Empathy
7. Patience
8. Creativity
9. Lifelong learning
10. Teamwork
11. Positive attitude
12. Stress management

Probing questions

Q: Have you engaged in any form of professional or personal development or training recently?

Responses included participation in workshops, conferences, and online courses. These activities were seen as vital for staying updated with best practices.

Q: Have you explored acquiring new skills outside of teaching?

Some participants shared experiences in developing skills such as digital content creation and multimedia production, which enriched their teaching methods.

Q: Are there any noteworthy best practices or innovative approaches that you've come across?

Examples included flipped classroom models, gamification, and personalized learning strategies. Participants expressed interest in further exploration.

Closing questions

Q: Compared to past years, how do you find forming relationships with your students?
Responses indicated mixed experiences, with some finding it more challenging in a virtual setting, while others appreciated the opportunity for more one-on-one interactions.

Q: How concerned are you about your students' academic progress?
Participants expressed varying levels of concern, with an emphasis on personalized support and differentiated instruction.

Q: What activities do you believe are needed to support effective digital learning?
Suggestions included regular check-ins, interactive assignments, and providing additional resources for struggling students.

Conclusion

The focus group discussions provided valuable insights into the multifaceted experiences of educators in the context of distance learning. It was evident that teachers have exhibited remarkable adaptability and resilience in navigating the challenges posed by the shift to remote and hybrid teaching models. The following key conclusions emerged from the discussions:

- Educators demonstrated a commendable capacity for flexibility, embracing creative approaches to teaching in virtual environments. The integration of digital tools and innovative teaching methods were identified as significant strengths.
- Teachers emphasized the importance of a diverse skillset encompassing both soft skills and technical proficiency. Notably, problem-solving, patience, creativity, teamwork, adaptability, communication, empathy, technical proficiency, motivation, and resilience were identified as critical competencies.
- Participants highlighted the necessity for robust support systems, including peer collaboration, ongoing professional development, and access to resources, to bolster their effectiveness in distance teaching.
- Educators expressed a strong commitment to addressing the diverse needs of students, with a particular emphasis on social-emotional well-being and personalized support.

Recommendations

Building on the insights gathered from the focus group discussions, the following recommendations are proposed to enhance the professional competencies of educators in the context of distance learning:

1. Targeted professional development focused on enhancing soft skills such as problem-solving, patience, creativity, teamwork, adaptability, communication, and empathy. Offer specialized training in technical proficiency and effective use of digital tools.

2. Facilitate collaborative networks among educators to foster knowledge-sharing, mutual support, and the exchange of best practices. Encourage peer mentoring programs to further strengthen teaching competencies.
3. Provide ongoing access to workshops, webinars, and online courses that address emerging challenges and opportunities in distance learning. Encourage educators to actively seek out opportunities for skill enhancement.
4. Integrate social-emotional learning strategies into the curriculum to support the holistic development of students. Equip educators with the tools and resources necessary to address the emotional well-being of their students.

5. Offer specialized training in digital platforms and tools, with an emphasis on optimizing their use for effective teaching and learning. Provide resources for troubleshooting technical issues.
6. Recognize and celebrate the adaptability, creativity, and dedication exhibited by educators in navigating the challenges of distance learning. Create platforms for educators to share their success stories and innovative practices.
7. Foster a culture of innovation by encouraging educators to explore and implement innovative teaching methods. Support research initiatives aimed at identifying and disseminating best practices in distance education.

These recommendations aim to empower educators with the skills, resources, and support networks necessary to excel in the dynamic landscape of distance learning. By investing in the professional development of educators, we are not only enhancing their individual capacities but also enriching the overall quality of education delivered to students in virtual environments.