Chapter 11

IT Opportunities for Teacher Training and Support:
An Action Research During the COVID–19 Pandemic in Greece

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ABSTRACT

The evolution in the field of internet technologies and the spectacular acceptance of the world wide web have shaped a new framework, not only for teachers' training but also for their distant support. This study provides insights into the utilization of Microsoft Teams digital collaboration and communication environment to improve the ways teachers are trained and supported by educational work coordinators (EWCs), through an action research conducted in Peloponnese Regional Educational Planning Center, Greece. Research results reveal that Microsoft Teams can contribute to the improvement of teachers' training and support in many ways, considering how successfully it has been utilized to improve the ways teachers are trained and supported by EWCs since the COVID-19 outbreak. At the same time, however, policy makers and education officials should take specific steps in order to assist EWCs in utilizing Microsoft Teams for teachers' training and educational work support.

INTRODUCTION

The technological advances, especially those achieved during the last decade, and the exponential progress in the field of internet technologies have created new conditions and established direct communication, interaction, collaborative action and social networking as core elements of a new reality, as these concepts are closely related to fundamental quality characteristics of the way people learn, create, share,

collaborate, support each other, make decisions, critique etc. (Selwyn, 2014, cited in Benkler, 2014, pp. 191-216; Chen, 2016, cited in Kadry & El Hami, 2016, pp. 114-117).

This study provides insights into the utilization of a digital collaboration and communication environment to improve the ways teachers are trained and supported by Educational Work Coordinators (EWCs), through an action research conducted in Peloponnese Regional Educational Planning Center (REPC), Greece. Subsequently, the action research investigates EWCs' school principals' and teachers' views, perceptions, experiences and personal stories on key issues regarding the utilization of Microsoft Teams digital collaboration and communication environment for teachers' training and educational work support in circumstances requiring distance teachers' training and support, as is the case with the covid-19 pandemic. The reasons for choosing Microsoft Teams for the purpose of this action research were the fact that it was already in use by the Peloponnese REPC since September 2019 for communication and collaboration with remote school units and the fact that its use was free for EWCs and teachers through their academic license.

The first section of this study focuses on the theoretical background of the above-mentioned action research. In this context, the notions of distance education, adult learner characteristics, teacher training and educational work support, e-learning and types of e-learning are clarified. Emphasis is placed on the analysis and documentation regarding the use of advanced internet technologies for teachers' training and support of educational work. Moreover, the core elements and functions of Microsoft Teams collaboration and communication environment as well as a literature review regarding the use of Microsoft Teams in workplaces and school and/or academic contexts are presented.

In the second section of this study, the research methodology and the results of the action research we conducted over a period of five months are presented; we investigated "if" and "how" a digital collaboration and communication environment, such as Microsoft Teams, can be utilized to improve the ways teachers are trained and supported by EWCs. The action research was carried out in the region of Peloponnese, Greece, during the period between December 2019 and April 2020, and study participants included four (4) EWCs, twelve (12) primary or secondary school principals and thirty-two (32) teachers in primary and secondary schools.

According to the findings of the action research, there is strong evidence suggesting that Microsoft Teams digital collaboration and communication environment can contribute in many ways to the improvement of teachers' training and educational work support by EWCs, especially for schools that are dispersed in different or inaccessible regional units, or when circumstances require distance teachers' training and support. The results of the action research also reveal that, since the outbreak of the covid-19 pandemic, Microsoft Teams has been utilized to improve the ways teachers are trained and supported by EWCs in an innovative, productive and efficient way.

Furthermore, research participants pointed out that policy makers and the Peloponnese REPC should take specific steps in order to assist EWCs in utilizing digital collaboration and communication environments, such as Microsoft Teams, for teachers' training and educational work support, given that, at the time the research was carried out, epidemiologists underlined that covid-19 pandemic's second wave was "knocking at the door".

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