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SPECIAL EDITION PreK-12 Education During the Pandemic: Lessons Learned

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New England College
98 Bridge Street, Henniker, NH 03242
603.428.2000

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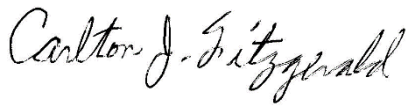
Message From the Editor

During the past two years, it has become abundantly clear how important teachers are in the teaching and learning process for their students. I recently listened to a report about how seriously the stress of the pandemic has affected students, parents, and teachers. What was most striking were the percentages of young people who are dealing with complex social and emotional issues that are causing psychological and medical problems for our students. Teachers and administrators are crucial elements in helping young people weather the storms, past and present. In this special edition of the NEC Journal of Applied Educational Research, PreK–12 educators share their experiences and lessons learned during the pandemic. Hopefully, this was cathartic for the authors and helpful for their readers, as we attempt to develop our skills as educators so that our students gain form our experiences. I also hope that we will be better prepared to help our students and colleagues when we enter the next emergency. Additionally, any person who reads this edition is welcome to add your ideas and experiences for other colleagues to read and consider. If you wish to add to this edition, send me an email at: cfitzgerald@nec.edu. We would love to build our common knowledge and support each other in positive ways.

Thank you for all that you do for your students and families.



Carlton J. Fitzgerald, EdD

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Teaching Remotely

Eloisa Darcy, EdD

Rochester (New Hampshire) School District

For comments or questions for the author, contact Eloisa Darcy at edarcy7@gmail.com

Abstract

For the last 2 years, throughout the world, we have been dealing with the COVID-19 pandemic. Every aspect of our lives has been affected, and teachers have been asked to help maintain a semblance of normality for our students and their families. Last year was the most difficult year of my professional life, and I was not alone in that experience. In this article, I share some of my experiences and thoughts through this process. I am a reading specialist, and, before that, I was a kindergarten teacher. During the pandemic, I was asked to teach Grade 2 students online. I was nervous about the sudden change to a new grade level and a new job description because I care about being a good teacher, a good teammate, and a professional educator. I wanted my new students to get the education they deserved, so I set out to learn the curriculum and the technology needed to become an effective online Grade 2 teacher. Teachers all around the world were asked to change, almost overnight, what and how they teach; I survived, and my students survived. Unfortunately, along the way, many of us lost loved ones to the pandemic. My experiences gave me five lessons about the future: (a) Do not take what I have for granted, (b) Relationships are vital for students and teachers, (c) Flexibility is an important quality for teaching, (d) Be more prepared for the next emergency, and (e) Take care of myself. I hope this article gives you, the reader, hope for the future.

Keywords: online teaching, teaching during COVID-19, remote learning, dealing with stress

TEACHING REMOTELY

The 2019–2020 school year started out like any other school year. The kids and the staff were excited to begin a new year. Early in September and October, I started to hear about the COVID-19 virus on the news, but I never imagined it would have such a profound effect. It is ironic that everything about the school year started off in a very familiar fashion but ended in such uncertainty and anxiety. Most of the uncertainty and anxiety had nothing to do with "school." Teachers know and are used to every year being different, and the challenges of teaching vary from year to year. However, on March 11, 2020, COVID-19 was declared a global pandemic, and, by Friday, March 13, 2020, our school district was preparing bags of student materials to send home with our students so they could do work from home. I never imagined we would not return to school for the remainder of the year. I do not think I will ever start my day without truly being grateful for all I have.

On Monday, March 16, 2020, I fired up my computer and signed into Zoom. I did not really know what I was doing and quickly watched a few YouTube videos on how to set up Zoom. I then called each one of my kindergarten students and talked to their parents about what time I would be meeting with their child and the length of time they would be online with me. I quickly discovered my students' parents also did not know how to get on Zoom. So, I walked each parent through the process and got on Zoom with them while talking on the phone. It took all week for me to reach all parents and go through this process one by one.

In the beginning, I spent an enormous amount of time determining how to present materials and making PowerPoint slides to go with the reading lessons I was teaching. I had to adapt the materials I was using in school to online materials 5-year-old students found attention worthy. Their attention span in school is normally very short; however, their attention span

online was a lot lower. It was quite challenging to keep their attention, and it was very frustrating when I had their attention and then the internet froze. It was at times quite comical as well. When my students got tired of what we were doing, they would just get up and leave. The months from March to June were difficult. I did not feel I was making a difference. I did not realize that, come fall, it would be the most difficult and challenging year of my entire professional life. March to June 2020 was just a tiny wrinkle in the whole scheme of things.

Remote Teaching

During the summer of 2020, I was asked to teach second grade remotely. First, it had been 4 years since I had taught in the classroom, and a lot had changed in that time. Second, I left a kindergarten position. I did not know much about teaching second grade. I felt like a 1st-year teacher. I was nervous and anxious about what I did not know. You do not know what you do not know, and that is a very scary thought. As a veteran teacher, I could now see that. When I started teaching, I was anxious about fitting in and doing a great job so others would like me. As a veteran teacher, I understood more fully that the stakes were much higher. The proof is in student performance on standardized tests. So, I wondered and worried about whether the instruction was highly effective so student learning and academic growth would be evident. I also understood my students' emotional well-being was critical to learning. I could see a huge responsibility in front of me. My students were at home, and they did not have their classmates sitting next to them. How could I, as their teacher, create a classroom environment that mimicked a "typical" school day? How could I balance academics and give them what they really needed, which was a sense of security and familiarity? I felt the pressure of delivering a rich and engaging curriculum and the need to ensure my students had a sense of belonging and connection to their classmates and to me. How was I going to do that when everyone was on a

screen? These were all questions that swirled around in my head each day and kept me up late at night.

I thanked God each day as I was placed at a very good school in our district. It is a small school, including one teacher per grade, support staff, and the usual people who make up a school. They were all so awesome. They are exemplars of human beings. Everyone genuinely works together. My principal is very knowledgeable and supportive of her staff. In addition, my district did a great job with having our curriculum in a digital format. That was my silver lining. I am thankful I did not have to worry about not having adequate materials with which to work. My worry was about learning how to use all the online components quickly and efficiently.

I also stressed over my students' well-being and how I was going to ensure they felt a sense of belonging, because the isolation and being away from their friends was very much on their minds. They expressed sadness at not seeing, talking to, and playing with their friends in person. It was a tremendous weight and worry for me. The second most frustrating part of my job, as well as for parents, was the internet issues that arose almost daily in some form or another. I do not know how many times I lost my internet connection while I was home. The internet was better when I worked from school. Even though all students were provided with Chromebooks, quite a few of my students did not have internet. It was a very hard time for families. Their stress was about having to share teaching responsibilities with me and not knowing what to do and how to do it. Parents also had to deal with the fact that kids are not always receptive to parents taking on the role of their teacher. Children just want mom and dad to be mom and dad. Many parents were also juggling work responsibilities. It was a balancing act all of us were not used to. Many parents had to be online at work at the same time their child was online at school, so they could not support their child's learning as closely as they wanted to.

There were many days, weeks, and even months that I did not see a few of my second graders. They did not get online. Several of them did not come to school. I did not get to meet them. They lost an entire school year.

Personal Challenges

March of 2020 did not start out badly; however, once everyone was mandated to stay home, things quickly went south. I had watched the number of COVID deaths in the United States and around the world rising, and I am sure many of my colleagues had the same observations. I never imagined it would hit home so quickly. I lost an uncle, two aunts, and a cousin to COVID. Although I had not been in close contact with them in recent years, it was hard to wrap my brain around the fact that they all passed from COVID within a few weeks of each other. They did not have the chance to get the vaccine, as it was not available at that time. It seemed that, each week, I knew someone who had contracted COVID and then passed from it.

In October of 2020, I had to take my husband to the emergency room because he woke up in extreme pain. When we got to the hospital, they would not let me go in. He could not talk to them, so I had to call and talk to the attending nurse about his medical history. I waited in the parking lot several hours before I could get anyone to talk to me. I did not know what was going on or how he was. I was so stressed out and extremely worried. In those hours, I understood a tiny bit of what families with loved ones in the hospital were going through. Not being with your loved one is difficult. I could not imagine how he felt as well. I do not know how many times I called to check on him, and they would say someone would call me back, but they did not call. Hours later, my husband called from his cell phone to ask where I was. Then he walked out of the hospital and into my car. He asked them why no one had called me, and they said they were so busy. He was not in a life-or-death situation, so it was not their top priority. I tried to put it in

perspective, and, as I reflect, I can understand the magnitude of what they were dealing with was certainly greater than what my husband went through. In those few hours, I came to understand the fear, frustration, and extreme heartbreak of people who were not allowed to visit their loved ones while they lay dying. It was a very long and stressful day, yet, in the scheme of things, others had it worse.

Lessons Learned

Having gone through the most difficult year of my career has taught me five very important lessons: (a) Do not take what I have for granted, (b) Relationships are vital for students and teachers, (c) Flexibility is an important quality for teaching, (d) Be more prepared for the next emergency, and (e) Take care of myself. Each of these lessons helped me to make it through the most difficult days, and these lessons have helped me to be a strong person, both professionally and personally.

First, when I wake up each day now, I am grateful for all I have. No longer do I take my loved ones for granted. No longer do I take my school and my colleagues for granted. No longer do I take my students for granted. Every day now I try to remember to be grateful for the people in my life and for the honor I have of being a teacher. I hug my loved ones a little more often, harder, and longer. I now see my colleagues in a brighter way, and I notice their goodness and their skills as teachers and as people. My students are even more important to me now. Each day I try to remember to tell them how special they are, and how lucky I am to be their teacher.

Second, I am more aware that every student must have a positive and productive relationship with me, their teacher, and with their peers. Each day, I make sure to have a positive conversation with each of my students. We talk more about how we are a family in our class and must support each other every day. In school, I try harder to notice my colleagues, and, when I

see someone having a rough day, I try to encourage them. Now, I am much more able and willing to let the little things go. In our interactions, I try hard not to be judgmental of people, and I am more open to seeing differences as gifts instead of a hindrance.

Third, as a teacher, I have always tried to be organized, maybe even over-organized. Through the years, I have always been concerned that my students will do well on their standard assessments. Today, I still want to be organized, and I still want my students to assess well, but it is just as important that my students and colleagues are well emotionally and physically. That allows me to be more flexible in my work. I am more willing to change the lesson of the day when I see that my kids need more attention or are stressed. Their social and emotional needs are more important to me now, and if it means their test scores are slightly lower, then so be it. My students must be strong within themselves, and I now notice more and try to help them to be stronger.

Fourth, there will be another emergency that will force society to adjust how we live. There will be storms, health crises, economic crises, political crises, and other emergencies that affect how we teach. I realize I must be more prepared for the next crisis. I will use technology more in my normal teaching. I will develop options for students who are ill and must miss school for a time. I am now more prepared to deal with snow or loss of electricity days. As I develop teaching units, I am more mindful of being prepared for Plan B. In addition to learning more about reading and language in my professional development, I am determined to continue to learn about using technology in my teaching. When the next emergency hits our schools, I am and will continue to be more prepared to deal with the new normal for that emergency.

Finally, I have learned that each of us must take care of ourselves. We must be strong emotionally and physically to deal effectively with the stresses of society, our families, and our

jobs. We cannot ignore ourselves because, if we do, then we will not be strong enough to help each other, our students, and their families—or our own families. I do my best work with and for my students when I am strong. The same is true for my family, friends, and colleagues.

I have faced the most difficult year of my professional life; I survived, and I helped my students survive. The lessons I learned during this process have made me a much stronger teacher and person. We are not finished with this pandemic yet, but I am convinced we will all be stronger as we move through the next phase and then the next emergency. I am a teacher, and that is what teachers do.

COVID-19 has made its mark on the world. It has changed all our lives forever in some way; however, I like to believe that it personally afforded me insight on how truly critical our connections are to people and that I must always strive and prioritize the well-being of my students first before I worry about test results. I also know friendships and family are everything. My prayer each day is to make teaching decisions based on what my students need to be ready to learn, and I hope my actions and words tell my family and friends I love and cherish them.

Relationships in Education

Matthew Leonard, MEd

New England College

For comments or questions for the author, contact Matthew Leonard at mleonard1_gps@nec.edu.

To review and/or listen to Matthew Leonard's blog or podcast go to:

https://sites.google.com/view/coviducation/home

Abstract

Throughout my teaching career, I have believed it is important to develop positive relationships with my students and help my students develop positive relationships with each other. In my personal and professional experiences, I have observed the positive differences strong relationships have on how my students engage in class and how comfortable they are taking reasonable risks in their work. Many students enter my class either feeling they are not good math students or are outright fearful of math. I believe one of my jobs as a teacher of math is to help those students who feel uncomfortable or fearful of math become aware that they can be successful math students. The COVID-19 pandemic complicated all learning processes throughout the world and created unique issues for teachers to build positive relationships with our students. In this article, I discuss some of the issues caused by remote learning and my efforts to overcome those issues. I wish I could say I was 100% successful in my efforts, but sadly, I cannot. What I can say is that I believe I made a positive difference for many of my students in terms of building stronger relationships and helped some students. As one mother told me, her child "looked forward to math class for the first time." My efforts were not perfect, but they were constructive and useful for my students.

Keywords: student-teacher relationships, engagement, personal connections, motivation

RELATIONSHIPS IN EDUCATION

Relationships are the backbone of effective teaching in the 21st century and are key factors influencing students' emotional connection to school and even their academic performance (Toste et al., 2015). Making personal connections with students allows teachers to build trust, encourage engagement, and raise motivation. Sustained positive interactions can help students develop a lifelong love of learning and promote positive attitudes that last throughout students' day. Teachers who have built upon the trust and goodwill they have with their students can serve as mentors for students and help them develop many needed skills to be successful members of a global society. This role of teacher mentor can be especially meaningful for students who are identified as being at risk and can encourage self-regulation and promote the development of socially appropriate behaviors (Toste et al., 2015). Creating and sustaining positive relationships is imperative if we wish to be the most effective teachers we can be!

The most important thing I do as a teacher is to make my students feel comfortable in their learning environment. Laying the foundation for strong, positive relationships in the classroom is essential for ensuring student success, and it is something I feel I do well. In years past, I would spend the 1st week of class playing the obligatory "get to know you" games that were sure to win me an eye roll or two. There would be sharing circles and team building as well as collective expectation building and corny dad jokes. My start of the year routine was a time when I could begin to show students that I cared about them as people and thought of them as more than just names on a roster. That 1st week of school was my time. Math instruction could wait. The pandemic amplified that.

Relationship Building During Hybrid Learning

In a regular year, I would spend time at the beginning of the first term setting up the foundations for positive relationships using all the get-to-know-you games and circle of power and respect conversations. Then, as the year went on, I would build upon what I learned about my students while being a mentor and positive adult role model during class time. I also engaged with students after school as a club advisor. Fast forward to my COVID adventure, and I was more available to my students than in any other year. When we first came back, we were in a hybrid model where I saw 50% of the students in person Monday and Tuesday and then the other 50% in person on Thursday and Friday. I would also have an hour after school when I would sign onto Google Meet, and any student who needed help could sign on and chat. Wednesdays were virtual days where students would have assignments, and teachers would have office hours throughout the day students could access if they had questions or needed assistance. It was during these extra hours where I got to know the students who showed up.

For the students who rarely or never came to office hours, I had much less time than I usually would in a regular year to bolster those relationships. I am not ashamed to admit that, because of the circumstances of the year, while I was still teaching math, I focused on students' well-being more than curriculum content. It was much easier for students to get me off topic during class, because I welcomed opportunities to get students to chat about their lives, encourage them to discuss the struggles they were encountering throughout the year, and allow them time to share their thoughts and concerns with a caring adult. We also played a lot of Kahoot and GeoGuessr together at the beginning or end of class and went outside as much as possible. Students played kickball or wall ball (with masks on), went on walks in the woods (appropriately distanced), or just sat in the sun (apart from each other but close enough to chat).

Although this took away from academic time, I felt it was good for relationships because students saw that I recognized them as people, was empathetic, and cared about their mental well-being. The goal of education in the time of COVID was still to support students' academic achievement, but many teachers chose to shift pedagogical priorities from academics to supporting students' socioemotional needs (Guzy, 2020).

Relationship Sustaining During Remote Learning

In the middle of November, the decision was made to go fully remote with our teaching until after Thanksgiving break. COVID numbers in the area were steadily climbing, and several members of the school community had tested positive. The administration decided, "out of an abundance of caution," to pivot to virtual instruction until the number of cases in the area had subsided. By the end of November, however, it was clear remote learning would continue until after the December break.

I felt a twist in my gut for what this meant to our relationship-building efforts. Not only was the normal routine for solidifying the foundations of those positive relationships not implemented at the beginning of the year, but now teachers would have to contend with blank screens and muted microphones. It was not looking good. Due to some schools moving to a virtual learning environment, educators were forced to rebuild their relationships in a virtual format that they may not have encountered before, which required teachers to practice care and exude connectedness by being warm and responding to students' emotional needs as they manifested (Miller, 2020).

The virtual schedule was, at least on paper, a step up from the hybrid classes. Teachers would have their 50-minute core classes with the A and B pod students together. Students would go to four courses a day, plus an allied arts class, all mixed together. I could not wait for students

to have more classmates with whom to interact, albeit online, during learning activities. In my head, this meant branching out our team-building efforts and including students who may have had strong connections in previous years or during after-school activities.

Unfortunately, as the time our school spent in completely virtual mode continued, many of my students began to disengage from the class. This became apparent to me quickly as I started to see more and more blank screens coupled with less talking or typing in the chat. I had envisioned sending students into breakout rooms to work in small groups, but as I rotated between rooms, I found many of the rooms lacked full participation as students were reluctant to talk to each other or even me when I asked how things were going. It was frustrating for me but also for the small handful of students who were ready to participate in a group and who wanted to work on the day's assignment. I vowed to double down on my attempts to sustain the fledgling relationships that had been born at the beginning of the year.

One wonderful thing that happened during the fully virtual time was when a few students who were shy and quiet when in person began to carry the conversations during our virtual meetings. During one lesson on similarity, as I was sketching a picture on a Jamboard presentation and getting ready to explain the steps to solve the problem, I had a student volunteer to model how to solve the problem for the class. I was happy to take a backseat as this student, who had much better penmanship on this virtual board than I did, explained the process while illustrating their thoughts as they went. I am always grateful when a student takes the initiative like that, but what made it particularly delightful for me was knowing this student had avoided bringing attention to themselves during in-person classes. This student continued to volunteer and eventually became my scribe any time I needed something illustrated on the Jamboard. It was easily one of my top five experiences during our virtual learning time.

Office Hours – Academic Help Turned Socialization Buoy

Ever since my 1st year of teaching, I have offered to meet with students before or after school to get extra help. This year, I made myself virtually available for an hour each afternoon so, if someone needed help, they could join Google Meet, and we could work through the issue together. Students would still email me their questions sometimes, and I would do my best to answer, but I felt more successful when they attended the virtual meeting.

From September to November, only a small handful of students would attend my office hours, and those who did worked through their problems quickly. After observing students and collecting data for the 1st month of school, I reached out to many families to invite students whom I thought needed extra help to the afternoon virtual meetings. My endeavors were somewhat successful at first, but soon, only a handful or regulars were seen on a given afternoon.

During the virtual period from the middle of November to the beginning of January, I noticed changes in students who came to my office hours. A student would come to ask their questions and get help on something we had talked about in class, but, once the work was done, they would linger behind their blank screens with muted microphones while I assisted other students who were waiting. Some days, I would have two or three students hanging around, which I assumed meant they were interested in the explanations I was giving to others. However, once the math talk was done, students who were waiting around would ask a question completely unrelated to the math we had done or to school in general. The first time it happened, we all ended up talking for 10 minutes past when office hours were done. I realized these students were craving attention, a sense of belonging, and some socialization beyond what they were getting while having to stay distanced from everyone who was not a part of their family.

My first hint that students were looking for more socialization was a cold November morning in the middle of my first block of office hours. I had finished helping a student when they asked if I liked hot cocoa. My response to the cocoa question was a resounding, “Yes!” I immediately jumped up, grabbed the big container of hot cocoa mix I kept in the kitchen, which was close to where my computer was, and showed the students who were on the virtual meeting. One thing led to another, and eventually the four of us who were still on the office hour meeting ended up drinking cocoa together. This incident led to an almost daily ritual where students would come to my office hours, sometimes with math questions, but often not, and we would drink cocoa and talk.

Similar to socializing around mugs of hot cocoa, students also wanted to talk about food and what they were watching on TV. My enthusiasm for food, television, video games, and movies was well known to my students because that was how I introduced myself at the beginning of the year. I also used stories involving my interests to sustain my relationships with students. There were many students who loved talking to me about video games and movies, and I milked those conversations for everything they were worth. One student had been given a stand mixer for their birthday and would ask me what kinds of things to make. This eventually led to them baking things and showing their finished products to those of us who were on the virtual meetings. I must be honest and say I was a little disappointed that more students did not want to talk about math or get help on some of their assignments, but being there for my students to help them through the uncertainty and anxiety that accompanied virtual learning was deeply fulfilling for me, and I suspect and hope it was meaningful for my students.

Parents also appreciated the conversations I was having with students, as I found out when I was contacted long after our school came back from a virtual environment to hybrid

learning. During the food and television conversations that occurred over nice mugs of cocoa, I was also shown many students' pets. My natural love for animals caused me to be vocal about the cuteness of all their dogs, cats, lizards, turtles, bunnies, hamsters, and even a couple of fish. One student had seven bunnies and showed them to me on multiple occasions. I asked lots of questions about them, and the student would answer with tons of information and make sure I saw each one before they signed off. This happened regularly throughout the year. When I was contacted by the student's mother, the first line of the email was, "I've been listening to your conversations during your office hours." I immediately thought of all the time I had spent with students talking about non-math-related things and thought I was going to get chewed out for being a math teacher who does not talk about math; however, I did not need to fear! The mother told me how great she thought it was that I was taking time to get to know my students and talk to them about their interests and issues. This parent explained that their student had been scared in math because they thought they did not understand a lot, but because we had been talking about the bunnies, the student became more comfortable asking questions in class and getting help during my office hours. The parent told me their student looked forward to talking to me every day, felt more confident, and now loved going to math. Her message filled me with a sense of accomplishment, and I felt validated by everything I had been doing with my students to sustain those positive relationships, even at the expense of traditional academics.

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Pandemic + Teaching = Stress

Stacie Hanewich, MEd

New England College

For comments or questions for the author, contact Stacie Hanewich at shanewich_gps@nec.edu.

Abstract

Teachers around the world have had to struggle with maintaining their family and personal issues during the pandemic while also attempting to assist their students and their families. In this article, I share part of my experiences as a teacher who has dealt with remaining positive and hopeful amid the worldwide pandemic. I work with special education students and have worked hard to make sure my students and I were safe in our work in school from March 2020 to the present. Because I was focused on the stress of the adults around me (and my own stress), I was somewhat surprised, though I should not have been, that my students were affected negatively by the stress caused by the pandemic. When I realized what was happening to my students' emotions, I changed how I was teaching and working with them. I tried to make learning more fun and engaging and less stressful for my students. I used the resources I had and other resources I found online. I was pleasantly surprised with how effective my efforts were for my students. Together we made the best of our times together, and I learned that, despite all the obstacles presented by the pandemic, my students could prosper.

Keywords: teaching in a pandemic, stress and learning, emotional well-being, student-centered teaching and learning

PANDEMIC + TEACHING = STRESS

March of 2020 seemed to be going exactly like it always had for me as a special education teacher. I was knee deep in the Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System Alternate Portfolios, cursing the Department of Elementary and Secondary Education for making these a requirement. I had started testing a student for his reevaluation, my students were going stir crazy, and we were counting down the days until April vacation. To be quite honest, I paid little attention to the news. I did not know much about "coronavirus," as it was being called. Just that it was overseas, and I felt terrible it was happening.

March rolled on, and rumblings in school began about the virus. Teachers started talking about a possible 2-week shutdown of schools to deep clean and kill any possible trace of the virus, which seemed to be making its way to the United States. On the morning of Friday, March 13, 2020, I vividly remember being in the front office, sitting on the table with the printer, talking to the administrative assistant and assistant principal. They began to speculate about an impending shut down. I sat there is disbelief. I clearly had not paid enough attention to the news.

A few hours later, the superintendent sent an email to staff, letting us know before the public was notified that he, along with superintendents of the surrounding districts, had decided to shut down the school for 2 weeks. He described the cleaning that would take place and was confident 2 weeks would be enough to fight off the virus. He instructed us to gather anything we needed to teach for that period of time as we would not be allowed back in the building. Chaos ensued. We all went door to door making sure fellow staff members had checked their emails, and we gathered everything we thought we could possibly use to prepare. We all joked that we were excited for a mini vacation, not knowing exactly what was about to come.

Our district quickly set up accounts for Google Meets to begin the endeavor of virtual learning. For most, this was no problem. For a teacher of intellectually impaired students in Grades K–4 who were all doing different things, it was no easy task. I spent hours the 1st week preparing activities for my students to do at home and attempted online learning. I held individual meets for each student and an afternoon meet for the entire class. My paraprofessionals helped. They read stories or created activities at home. It seemed to be going okay. As the 2 weeks began to end, it became clearer online teaching and learning may not be a temporary event.

We all know what happened next. The world was turned upside down. There was turmoil and chaos everywhere one turned. We were all in a perpetual state of anxiety, wondering whether we and our loved ones would be safe and whether our basic needs could be met with the many shortages the pandemic brought. But the show had to go on, and students still had to learn. Just because the world seemed to stop, education did not. Teachers worked harder and longer than they ever had before as they attempted to meet the challenges of teaching in the pandemic.

As a special education teacher, extra paperwork is a given. This was especially true during the pandemic. The district created “COVID Learning Plans” that outlined the plan for each child and how the teacher/service providers planned to meet IEP needs and goals. We were also asked to keep a log of every communication that took place with parents and students. The central office wanted to know the duration, what we did, and what we worked on.

I was not prepared to teach remotely for as long as I did, so naturally I did not bring home nearly enough to do. I discovered online resources, like Boom Learning, and supplemented with weekly purchases from Amazon. Time passed, and remote learning continued to be a struggle for my students. It was difficult to get them to attend to the tasks during the meets. It was even more

difficult to control their negative behaviors, especially because their parents had to sit with them for all the meets. I also had a student with no access to internet. I called her every week, said hello, and told her I missed her. She had zero schooling from March until we returned to school in fall of 2020. The 2-week vacation we thought we had turned out to be much more stressful.

I continued teaching remotely until the end of the 2019–2020 school year, had a short break, and then continued remote learning with my students during summer school. It felt like Groundhog Day. As summer began to end, more anxiety began. Would we return to school like normal? Would we stay remote?

Parents were eager to get their children back to school and asked me daily if I knew what might happen. Very late in the summer, we found out the "high needs" populations would return to school in a more normal manner than the rest of the district. So, in we went, 4 days a week until 12:00 p.m., and then the students went home, and we did a remote group in the afternoon. Talk about stress! We were petrified someone would get sick. To be honest, I was also a little angry. Why did I have to do in-person learning when nobody else had to? The stress was getting the best of me. I was cranky and at times short tempered with my students. They were struggling just as much as I was. We were self-contained, learning to tolerate hours at a time in masks, and getting used to how life in school now looked. I knew I needed to reassess and determine new ways to complete activities and teach my students in this new environment. We were all struggling, and I needed to take the first step to make things better.

Emotions and learning go hand in hand. Emotions play a large role in the classroom. As Sousa (2017) wrote, "Emotions drive attention, and attention drives acquisition of new learning" (p. 92). As teachers, now more than ever, it was extremely important to check in on students and their social emotional well-being. There were two important factors to consider in the

classroom—the first was the learning climate in the classroom, and the second was the connection between emotions and what students are learning. Sousa (2017) discussed the importance of students feeling safe in their learning environments and having connections with their teachers. In my classroom, I always make sure to let my students know our classroom is a safe space, and, if they feel upset or sad, they can talk to me about it. Sousa also wrote it is important to create activities with which students are emotionally connected. Teachers can create lessons involving more emotions by asking students to put themselves in the shoes of others. I had not considered the role emotions played in the classroom prior to COVID-19. My students were prone to emotional outbursts and noncompliant behavior, but the emotions I was seeing were different. I had been so worried about myself, my staff, and my family and friends that I never considered the eight students in the building and the two at home I saw every day.

The pandemic taught me a lot about emotions. Typically, when I think of emotions, I relate it to behavior. If a student is mad or sad, they may act out behaviorally. With the pandemic, I found students were getting emotional purely from stress. Students required more down time and more lessons that did not feel like work. With so much unknown and the stress from the pandemic, I did not want school to be another source of stress for them. With that in mind, I restructured lessons I had already created, dug into my arts and crafts bins, and ordered new educational games online. We started doing more movement activities, more song-driven ways to learn, and I was teaching to the whole brain (Sousa, 2017). We learned to count doing jumping jacks, learned colors by walking around the classroom looking for certain items, and learned sight words using song and dance. In an article published by the American Psychological Association, Semrud-Clikeman (2021) discussed the benefits of adding motor and auditory skills in the classroom. According to Semrud-Clikeman, pairing these skills together increases the

development of both pathways. This allows all students to access an activity at their level in their own way.

To my surprise, it worked. I had students reading for the first time ever, despite the immense stress the pandemic added to their day to day. It showed me how resilient my students were, and, despite everything, they could persevere. Making simple changes to improve the environment in which my students were learning made a world of difference. Their emotions changed. They seemed happier, more engaged, and more excited to come to school. I was excited for them! I started to hear constant laughter in the classroom. Things started to feel more normal.

The school year came to an end. There were many bumps along the way, but we made it! All teachers felt a sense of relief when the last students left on the final day. Although this school year (2021–2022) has not been a typical one, my students have been able to spend time in their general education classrooms, attend specialist classes, and have lunch and recess with their peers. This change has again created a shift in their emotions. They love being with their general education peers, and they have been better behaved because they have been allowed to go back. My students are exposed to positive peer role models and can see what the right thing is to do. My emotions are better as well. My room has returned to a more normal schedule than last year—not quite normal but getting there. I feel happier that my students are happier, which is making the environment a more positive one to be in.

Ideas to Consider

Teaching in a pandemic has been terrible. But, on the bright side, I did learn a few things. Going forward, I will pay more attention to my students and how they are feeling. This pandemic taught me that emotions and learning have such a heavy influence on one another. I also realize

that when I help my students with their stress, it has a positive effect on my stress. I will be sure to change the way I teach and the way I structure my classroom going forward. Here are some ideas to consider as teachers prepare for the next emergency:

1. Set up a process that takes into consideration the social and emotional health of students.
2. Help students support each other.
3. Ensure teacher social and emotional health is strong. We cannot help our students if we are weak. Teachers should consider developing a system to maintain our social and emotional health to help us be strong.
4. When teachers support the social and emotional health of our students and each other, we also help our social and emotional health in the process.
5. Helping students to be engaged actively in their learning is even more important during an emergency like the pandemic.
6. Teachers need to laugh with our students and with each other.
7. Special education students require interactions with their peers as much and maybe even more during remote learning.
8. Remember, we are stronger together than any one of us is alone.
9. Do not forget to tell the people you care about that you love them.
10. Most importantly, be safe and healthy.

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Collaboration in Education During a Pandemic

Beverly Puntin, MEd, CAGS

New England College

For comments or questions for the author, contact Beverly Puntin at bpuntin_gps@nec.edu.

To review and/or listen to Beverly Puntin's blog or podcast, go to:

https://sites.google.com/view/coviducation/home

Abstract

Collaboration between and among teachers has become an important aspect of my professional life. In our professional learning communities (PLCs), we, as teachers, help each other to be more effective with our students. Our collective efficacy is more than any of us could attain alone. In our PLCs, people help me, and I help them. We all grow because of our willingness to collaborate for the sake of all our students. When the pandemic hit, we first thought we would have to work remotely for 3 weeks or so. As we all now know, that was not the case, and we struggled to gain the collaborative strength of our PLCs. We met less often, and, when we did meet, it was not the same. Without the level of support we used to give each other, my colleagues and I struggled. I believe we came to understand how special our collaborative efforts were, and I will not take for granted how special our collaborative efforts are for our students and for us, the teachers. In this article, I offer a sense of my experiences during the pandemic, and I share a few lessons I learned along the way. If, or maybe when, we face our next pandemic or other emergency, I am hopeful we will be better prepared to be as collaborative as possible.

Keywords: collaboration, professional learning community (PLC), collective efficacy, student-centered teaching

COLLABORATION IN EDUCATION DURING A PANDEMIC

During Spring 2020, schools closed their doors due to the COVID-19 pandemic, and teaching and learning continued. Teachers had to adapt quickly to remote instruction while paying attention to the social-emotional needs of their students. Although many schools moved to a hybrid model in the fall, developing engaging instruction that met all students' learning needs continued to be challenging. With the need to distance socially, not only was the connection between students and teachers compromised, but that lack of connection impacted teacher collaboration and collective efficacy. When teachers work collaboratively, they develop collective efficacy, which is believing a collaborative group of teachers or faculty can work together on a common goal to improve student achievement (Goddard et al., 2004). However, the pandemic limited opportunities for collaboration and collective efficacy. According to Eells (2011), collective efficacy can be decreased when faced with a "shock to the system" (p. 95). The pandemic was a shock to the system, and developing meaningful content and instruction, which is challenging in a traditional school year, became even more complicated when working in isolation.

In March 2020, the teachers in my district, like many teachers and school districts, had very little time and preparation to move from in-person teaching and learning to a fully remote model. My school district provided teachers and staff 2 professional development days to prepare for a 3-week fully remote model. During those 2 days, teachers culled resources and developed engaging online activities our diverse students could complete independently. As an eighth-grade math and social studies teacher, I had my work cut out for me, as I needed to develop activities for three math levels (cotaught math, pre-algebra, and algebra I) and three social studies sections. Over the 2 days, my content teaching partners and I scrambled to learn new online formats to

create videos, puzzles, and activities to engage students and review previous content, as we believed we would be back in school in less than 1 month. After the 2 days, laden with supplies and my laptop, I left my classroom for what eventually became the rest of the school year.

Need for Collaboration

Due to not being in school, my contact and connection with students and fellow faculty were limited. With the onset of the pandemic and the move to a fully remote model, collaboration and weekly meetings came to a screeching halt. When remote learning needed to continue past the first 3-week period, I needed to connect with my fellow content teachers, but this connection was mainly carried out through email or occasional Zoom meetings. These meetings focused on what content and instruction would best meet students' learning needs; however, development of these lessons was completed independently and in isolation. I felt disconnected and overwhelmed.

Developing lessons for four different classes required me to spend hours in front of the computer creating lessons, assessing completed work, and checking in with students and families, all in isolation. Teaching is too cumbersome for one person to ensure a meaningful and relevant curriculum and meet the diverse learning needs of all students. Unfortunately, the pandemic and the need to socially distance impacted our ability to work collaboratively. Collaboration by email and occasional Zoom or Google Meet was not enough to effectively plan for instruction and meet students’ needs.

Before the pandemic, I had common planning time with my content teacher partners. I relied on this collaboration to share ideas to ensure students were engaged and meeting learning targets. Weekly meetings allowed us to discuss and differentiate content, develop assessments, review data, and reflect on what worked and what did not. By working collaboratively, teachers

increase collective knowledge and learning to improve their instruction and strengthen their practice (Learning Forward, 2011). When the pandemic hit, I had fewer opportunities to work collaboratively. I felt less confident in my ability to develop the content to meet learning standards and meet students' diverse learning needs. Collaboration helps to develop collective efficacy, which, according to Hattie (2016), has the most significant impact on student achievement (as cited in Donohoo et al., 2018). Teaching remotely is vastly different from teaching in person, and the need for collaboration and collective discourse was ever so great but rarely occurred.

The district opted for a hybrid model for the 2020–2021 school year and allowed families to decide to have their students be fully remote. Because this was another model for teaching and learning, a week of collaborative professional time was provided for teachers to prepare for the school year. The student day was shortened by 50 minutes to allow teachers more time to plan instruction collaboratively and hold virtual office hours; however, more time does not necessarily ensure developing content and assessing learning collaboratively. Even though I had common planning time with my math teaching partner, this did not include special educator coteachers. Further challenges included teachers at the middle school teaching both hybrid classes and at least one remote class. I had four hybrid courses (Algebra I, two pre-algebra sections, and cotaught math) and two remote courses (Algebra I and cotaught math).

Planning for in-person classes and remote classes is very different. Time was needed to develop instruction for both models and for the independent activities for hybrid students on their remote days. Activities had to be engaging and meet learning standards, but activities also had to be accessible for students. Additionally, teachers needed to address learning gaps from the previous spring. The instructional decisions were overwhelming, and the amount of planning and

instructional decisions increased. The management of collecting and evaluating work, providing feedback, and developing new content was tremendous.

Professional Learning

Reestablishing a weekly professional learning community (PLC), with the district math specialist and my teaching partner, supported instruction development to meet our students' needs and address learning gaps. Quality professional learning is an ongoing process that is a shared responsibility among participating teachers (Learning Forward, 2011). During our weekly meetings, we reviewed progress, determined which content standards to address and to what extent, developed common assessments, and reviewed results. We made strategic decisions about instruction based on the need to close learning gaps and because we only had students in person 2 days a week. Although the struggle to plan for different classes continued, I believe some of the issues were alleviated, because we worked collaboratively and built collective efficacy.

Collective Responsibility

Because professional learning communities create a collaborative and shared action, collective responsibility is established (Donohoo et al., 2015). Collectively, we set goals and determined what steps to take to improve student learning. Learning communities allow teachers to share feedback about their practices and resources, work together to develop formative and summative assessments, and evaluate the results (Learning Forward, 2011). We provided the needed peer support and collective inquiry to drive professional learning, leading to improved outcomes for all students. According to Honigsfeld and Nordmeyer (2020), collaboration is essential for teaching to meet students' diverse needs in our new teaching and learning reality due to the pandemic. By working collaboratively, our teaching group developed the collective action and responsibility to identify and take action to address inequitable practices.

The pandemic made the need for collaboration, collective responsibility, and sustained professional learning more apparent. Here are some lessons I learned from teaching during the pandemic:

1. Collaboration and collective responsibility ensure student learning and achievement. When teachers worked collaboratively to set goals, collect data, and evaluate data, we could make instructional decisions to improve student achievement.
2. Collaboration and collective responsibility allowed for collegial discourse focused on equitable learning for all students.
3. The PLC must be the shared responsibility of all team members. The collapse of professional learning in the spring of 2019 showed that the PLC had not been embedded fully in the team's shared culture.
4. It takes time and effort to build a culture of professional learning, and common planning time for all members (even in a fully remote system) is necessary to create an environment of collective responsibility.

The pandemic has shown me that teacher collaboration and professional learning are vital for continued teacher and student improvement. The need for social distancing to keep both educators and students safe is necessary, but teachers need to work together to develop the instruction and learning opportunities for all students. The task of teaching is overwhelming, and the pandemic has increased the need for collaboration and collective responsibility. When a culture of professional learning and shared goals is established and sustained, collective teacher efficacy improves, and student learning and educational equity increase.

In a time like the pandemic, efforts to collaborate take even more commitment and effort. From my experiences during the pandemic, I developed the following ideas for teachers to contemplate:

1. Commit to maintaining the schedule for PLC meetings. Common planning time is essential, and I believe we must each commit to PLC meetings, even during remote learning.
2. Continue to communicate with colleagues informally. Invite colleagues for a virtual team meeting to talk about how people are doing and to give each other support.
3. In times like the pandemic, teachers cannot do everything we want to accomplish. I believe it is important to prioritize with colleagues to agree on the most important and doable tasks the group can accomplish.
4. Understand that school will be disrupted (e.g., a pandemic, snow days, emergencies, health issues [influenza], hurricane, floods), and be as prepared as possible to have the tools needed to handle the situation. We cannot cover everything, but we know there will be disruptions, so prepare ahead for disruptions.
5. Develop systems for ensuring students can work remotely with success (e.g., make sure every student has access to technology), have a system in place to make sure students have access to Wi-Fi (e.g., create the ability to disperse hot spots to all students who need them), and ensure all teachers are capable to work remotely with their students (e.g., professional development, technology, access to the Wi-Fi).
6. Develop a system to ensure schools continue to support and develop the social-emotional needs of our students as much as possible.

These are ideas to consider, and although we cannot prepare for everything, we should prepare to help our students and each other as much as possible when an emergency occurs. One thing the pandemic has shown me is that teachers do and will step up when they are needed most. The more we can do so in collaboration with each other, the more effective we all will be.

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COVIDucation: Flexibility in Pandemic Education

Cody Booth, EdD

New England College

For comments or questions for the author, contact Cody Booth at cbooth_gps@nec.edu.

To review and/or listen to Cody Booth's blog or podcast go to:

https://sites.google.com/view/coviducation/home

Abstract

In mid-March of 2020, the United States realized the worldwide COVID-19 pandemic was real and was affecting our world in ways not seen for 100 years. From its tattered beginnings to now, teachers have answered the call and have remained vigilant and flexible regarding their professional practices, pedagogy, and overall sense of what it truly means to be a 21st-century teacher. In this article, I describe how three teachers decided the best way to produce an equitable education for our students and to maintain our own well-being was to collaborate flexibly with each other. We worked together and developed a system that allowed us to create interesting and high-level science experiences during times that were stressful and fearful for most people. I believe our abilities to cooperate, be flexible, and adapt for the good of each other and our students gave our students the opportunities they needed to be successful in our science classes. Teachers have always had to be flexible, but the pandemic pushed our abilities to new levels. I hope this article gives other educators a sense that, by flexibly working together, we can accomplish almost anything.

Keywords: flexibility, collaboration, teamwork, teaching and learning in a pandemic

COVIDUCATION: FLEXIBILITY IN PANDEMIC EDUCATION

Flexibility is a way of being or a quality limited to some but not all. Based on an underlying composition, some things can crack under immense amounts of pressure, and others are brittle and fall apart with the slightest bit of effort. Others maintain a high level of rigidity and refuse to give up their shape and composition, and some are so loose and free that they never give a thought to a particular form or structure.

In mid-March of 2020, public schools in the United States came to an abrupt halt due to the outbreak of COVID-19, a scenario that has not happened in over 100 years since the outbreak of the Spanish Flu/Influenza. From its tattered beginnings to now, teachers have answered the call and have remained vigilant and flexible regarding their professional practices, pedagogy, and overall sense of what it truly means to be a 21st-century teacher.

Flexibility, the capability to adapt to new, different, or changing requirements, has been a key weapon in a teacher's arsenal since the day they were all sent home until their return to a "new normal." Now either remote, hybrid, or 100% in-person, I believe teachers are hyper aware of just how flexible they need to be to provide an educational experience that is equitable and appropriate for all of their students in these dire times of the pandemic.

> "I'm a schoolteacher . . . When I tell people what I do for a living, they think, well, that figures. But over here . . . it's a big, big mystery" (Saving Private Ryan, 1998)

In Steven Spielberg's box-office World War II epic, *Saving Private Ryan* (1998), Tom Hanks portrayed John Miller, a war-hardened captain of the Second Rangers who stormed the Dog Green sector of Omaha Beach in the first wave of Operation Overlord, lost countless men along the way due to his decisions, and made it through insurmountable events with the main

task of finding and preserving the life of one elusive private of the 101st Airborne Division. However, with all the devastation occurring around him, the hopelessness of his squad, and the internal struggle of what his place was during this mysterious time of his life, Miller was reminded by one thing throughout the pandemonium: He was simply a humble teacher thrust into an arena of chaos, trying his best to survive.

For me, as a middle school science teacher who taught fully remote for the latter part of the 2020 school year and taught fully in person from Day 1 during the 2020-2021 school year, with maxed-out classrooms during the height of the pandemic, I reflect on where I have been, what I have done, what I have learned, where I am going, and what I will become as an educator after being thrust into the arena of chaos brought on by the COVID-19 global pandemic. I have been tested, triumphant, defeated, and reshaped into a "hardened teacher"; however, I am moldable, adaptable, and, above all, flexible.

Flexibility can be described as a capability to adapt to new, different, or changing requirements. As teachers, we were tasked with saving the sacred institution of teaching and learning during a global pandemic, and the ability to be flexible was paramount to the institution's overall survival. As the school years go on and the fight for education endures, flexibility among districts, administrators, and teachers must be present to make it out alive.

"I'll get a large coffee with cream only please," I utter as my fiancé finds us a seat at a local bakery. It is Sunday, March 15, 2020, and we are the only people in the barren café, about to enjoy our Sunday ritual. The desolation inside and outside is puzzling to us, as Sundays are usually booming here, but, in the back of our heads, we know the reason why. The pandemic is just beginning, schools and businesses are starting to close, and a whole new frontier of survival, as we know it, is about to begin. That's when I got the email . . .

Fast forward 2 days ahead to March 17, and I was now a teacher thrown into chaos and pandemonium. It was a confusing, daunting, and tiring time. Asked to come into school to make the shift to remote learning for 2 weeks, I was surrounded by brave teachers on a mission.

"Ok, where are we at in our curriculum?" one teacher asks. We are a team of three science teachers using a brand new, scripted primary resource.

"I'm on Chapter 2 of the chemical reactions unit, where are you at?" I responded.

"Ok, perfect, I'm right in line with you. Where are you at?" we ask the third member of our crew.

"Oh no . . . I'm nowhere near caught up with you guys . . . I'm still on the phase change unit from a month ago . . . this is not good," replies the other science teacher in our crew. She was disappointed in herself and felt she had let us down. Unison in lesson delivery had been a key pillar to this new science program to deliver an equitable experience, and she was remorseful. "I'm really sorry guys . . . what the hell are we going to do?!"

"Hey, it's ok," I replied. "None of us could have predicted this mess we're in right now. I think we're just going to have to bend the rules a little bit here and be as flexible as possible with the scenario that's been dumped into our lap."

We all shake our heads in agreement and begin to push forward.

None of us could have predicted 2 weeks of remote teaching and learning would turn into almost 4 months of content delivery and knowledge acquisition. The odds were stacked against us; however, never underestimate the ability of good teachers. Some districts were given the entire week of March 16–20, 2020, to prepare lessons and technology for delivery on the following Monday, March 23. In my district, we were given the task to get the job done appropriately and efficiently, with students "in school" by Wednesday, March 18th. Naturally,

we succeeded in this monumental task of converting public education into online learning, a task that had never been accomplished in the history of public education. It only took us 2 days to meet our goal.

Accomplishing this 2-day task was not easy and came with many sacrifices, all in the realm of flexibility. As mentioned, the odds were stacked against us, 2:1, when it came to what content was being delivered, and unison was key in making an equitable experience for all three science teams in seventh grade. The new science curriculum we were given at the beginning of the 2020 school year was a bit rigid and inflexible, as the lessons and activities had been designed by an outside entity, and they had to be completed within a certain timeline.

Curricular needs must have a flexible approach to match the adaptive and rapidly changing world around us. Our team believes, when teachers are provided a more flexible approach to curriculum, they can be more innovative and can implement change easily to meet the needs of the classroom they serve. Instead of working for the curriculum at this point, it was time to be flexible and have the curriculum work for us.

To make the beginning of remote learning easy for us, the two of us who were already ahead in the curriculum made the very easy and flexible decision to drop the unit we were halfway through. In compliance, the teacher who was a whole unit behind us dropped the unit she was teaching. The flexible decision to drop the two different units and start fresh with our students was paramount and served as a solid foundation for the beginning of remote learning. By the time students were ready to learn on Zoom, we had moved onto a brand-new unit on the academic calendar, a unit we would address in April, according to our academic calendar. With only 2 weeks of remote learning, we figured we would address the content we had to drop abruptly by the end of the school year.

"I'm exhausted, how about you guys?" I remarked, as my eyes glazed over from staring at the computer screen all day. It was around 1 p.m. on a warm May morning. I peered out the window at the hot pavement and saw the leaves were beginning to blossom on the ginkgo tree outside.

"Exhausted doesn't even begin to describe how I feel right now," sighed one of the other science teachers.

"I think the part that is beating me up the most is trying to fit everything from this new scripted resource into a 30-minute Zoom meeting! These lessons are designed for 45 minutes, and, even when we were teaching in person, I still couldn't even fit everything into that slotted amount of time! I think that's why I got so behind last time, and I feel like it's going to happen again!" exclaimed one of the teachers.

"I wouldn't worry about that now, it's in the past. However, I've been thinking, and I have a really good idea that could make the rest of this school year a little bit easier and flexible for all of us."

Our remote teaching campaign stretched on longer than 2 weeks and turned into the rest of the school year, as many of us predicted it would. As I began to type this on a snowy Saturday morning in February of 2021, the battle of remote teaching was still going on (and still is!) for most schools and districts across New Hampshire, the United States, and the world. The experience of teaching multiple students, nearly 100 middle schoolers in my caseload every day, in the ether of the internet, is a unique experience. We were driving ourselves to the brink, spending countless hours designing engaging activities that could be enjoyed at home, creating presentations, and adapting a square curriculum that needed to fit into a circular timeslot. We

realized our approach needed to change in this environment, or we would snap. Being flexible with one another was the key.

As three seventh-grade science teachers, we recognized we were all doing way too much. By bending and being flexible to each other's needs, we soon realized we could do one third of the work we were already doing and still get the job done of providing an equitable experience for not only the students we individually taught but also the whole seventh grade. For the rest of the year, we decided one person would be assigned to create a week's worth of science lessons. We would rotate this process over a 3-week rotation, as there were three of us. This made for a busy week of creating lessons for all three teachers to use if it was your turn; however, it did alleviate the pressure for the next 2 weeks, as the planning was very minimal and allowed us to focus on our pedagogy in this digital format. In this case, flexibility acted as a catalyst to make an educational experience that was equitable for all involved and was a means to choose what was best needed to meet the needs of students, the "classroom," and ourselves.

We continued this 3-week looping rotation for the remainder of the school year, bending and flexing to each other to make the experience of remote teaching easier for us. It was daunting and tiring at moments, but it also provided an outlet to be creative and flexible with the curriculum, technology, and tools at our disposal. In return, it also provided students with an equitable learning experience, as we were all in step with one another, providing the same lessons to students on a day-to-day basis.

Lessons Learned With Flexible Curriculum

Even pre-COVID, flexibility concerning curriculum was a hot topic in education. With heightened methods of standardization and rigidness with curriculum, studies have sought to find the benefit and impact of what flexibility permits. One thing is for certain: Current curricular

needs must have a flexible approach to match the adaptive and rapidly changing world around us (Jonker et al., 2020). When teachers are provided a more flexible approach when it comes to curriculum, they are found to be more innovative and can implement change easily to meet the needs of the classroom they serve (Jonker et al., 2020).

Flexibility pertaining to specific content areas (e.g., math and literacy) also has valuable outcomes. When teachers and students alike demonstrate stronger levels of flexibility regarding texts addressed with their classroom, heightened levels of play, talk, and communication are present (Hassett, 2008). With heightened levels of play, talk, and communication between teachers and students, flexibility acts as a means to approach education that is equitable for all involved and to choose what is best needed to meet the needs of the classroom (Hassett, 2008).

Go forth and be flexible in your behaviors, practice, pedagogy, and everything that encompasses the “new normal” of teaching during this unique time of pandemic and postpandemic education.

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Compliance or Engagement: Engaging Students Remotely

Jennifer Maio, MA

New England College

For comments or questions for the author, contact Jennifer Maio at jmaio06@nec.edu.

To review and/or listen to Jennifer's blog or podcast, go to

https://sites.google.com/view/coviducation/home

Abstract

How teachers interact with students is important, not only for students' intellectual growth but also for their social and emotional growth. In the classroom, it is easier to see when students are misunderstanding or are confused about some aspect of the lesson. By walking around the class, I can view what my students are producing, and I can see their faces, so I can tell when they are confused or overwhelmed. Then I can go to students individually and encourage them or help resolve their misunderstandings. When we moved online and developed rules to ensure compliance with our school rules for working online, I became more frustrated with finding the balance between spending my time and efforts to ensure students were in compliance with our new online regulations and my desire as a teacher to encourage and inspire students to love learning. At the beginning of our remote learning process, I found my students were not learning as well as they should have been. I realized the issues connected to the balance between compliance and true engagement for students became more difficult for me to manage as well as I wanted to. I found it was even more important to engage my students in deciding how we should work together and reflect about their learning. In my work with my students, I realized universal design principles (CAST, 2018) were even more important when the pandemic forced us to work remotely. In this article, I describe my efforts with and for my students.

Keywords: compliance, student reflection, universal design, student engagement, assessment practices

COMPLIANCE OR ENGAGEMENT: ENGAGING STUDENTS REMOTELY

In the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, teachers were faced with a multitude of new obstacles. With their students no longer sitting in the classroom, teachers needed to find ways to ensure students were learning. For most educators, teacher preparation programs and experience dealt with facilitating learning in person. Teachers could sit next to a child to help them get started with a task or provide them with the tools to persist through challenges. A teacher could pull a student aside and check in when it seemed they were having a rough day. While walking through the room giving a lesson, teachers could use a quick pat on a shoulder to refocus a child. None of this seemed possible through a computer screen.

Quickly, many questions arose for my colleagues and me. For example:

- How can teachers enforce these strict rules when they have no control over a student's home life?
- Does compliance with rules mean students are learning?
- Do educators want students to be compliant with the rules, or do we want our students to be invested in their learning and growth?
- Will enforcing a set of strict policies engage students?
- Will giving zeros for missed work in a global pandemic encourage students to be more invested in their coursework?

Although educators may have been struggling with these questions for a while, the pandemic brought them to the forefront. Many districts quickly turned to strict guidelines for remote learning: cameras on, sitting at desk or table, no eating/drinking, no blankets or pajamas, and in a

quiet space. The thought was that students would learn if they could replicate the school rules and environment at home. These policies left educators grappling with the differences between compliance and genuine engagement.

To examine the differences between the two, I first focus on defining the characteristics of both. In the book, *Engaging Students*, Schlechty (2011) outlined four characteristics of an engaged student: (a) attentiveness, (b) commitment, (c) persistence, and (d) the ability to find meaning and value in learning tasks. Schlechty put student engagement in a continuum, moving from rebellion and retreatism to ritual and strategic compliance and finally to engagement. According to this continuum, engaged students want to pay attention because they understand how important student engagement is for learning. Students are also committed to doing their best work and persisting through productive struggles. Compliant students are not motivated intrinsically to do well, but rather they follow along for a reward or to avoid punishment (Schlechty, 2011). These compliant students often just collect points and grades to get to a desired final grade for a course. Their learning journey does not hold much value if they achieve their end goal of a good grade. I have found educators who want to inspire their students must create an environment where risk taking and the learning journey are paramount and remove the focus from doing things just for a grade. Creating an environment like this takes time, persistence, and relationship building. So, how can educators create a truly engaged environment behind a computer screen?

Learning in a Pandemic

When schools first closed in March 2020, the Massachusetts Department of Education strongly recommended there be no new teaching and learning during this initial period. My district instructed us to provide only opportunities for students to review and enrich what they

had already learned. My district did not mandate remote classes, just optional ungraded, asynchronous work that would review previously taught material. We were encouraged to post daily in our Google Classrooms to remain in contact with our students. Every morning, I wrote messages to my eighth-grade students and provided them with online and offline English language arts activities to keep them learning. During this initial phase, many of my students did not log into or interact with my messages or optional assignments, but a handful did.

A few weeks later, when it was evident schools were not going to open for a while, the Massachusetts Department of Education required districts to create remote learning plans to get students learning new material again; this new phase of remote learning was mandatory per the Department of Education. In my middle school's remote plan, I would see my students for two class periods per week for synchronous learning, and then I would provide them asynchronous work for other days while offering office hours for those who needed more assistance with their work. I was fortunate to have most of my students attend my synchronous sessions, and we did our best to learn about Zoom.

I quickly realized my synchronous sessions were not working for all my students. Based on their participation and feedback on various weekly check-ins, giving instruction once or twice a week on a Zoom call was not sufficient for most of my students. So, we worked together through surveys and Google Docs to create a new plan for our learning: I would record 2 to 3 lessons per week for them to watch on Edpuzzle, a web platform allowing people to embed questions into video playback. Our Monday class, which was only 20 minutes, would remain mandatory and be a time for an overview of the week and general questions. Then, our one 45-minute class time later in the week would serve as office hours where students could drop in for questions or log in to work with me or individually in a breakout room. By the end of the week,

they would have an assignment to turn in, and I would check their progress with the week's lessons on Edpuzzle. These changes seemed to make a positive difference in our learning and growth, which was evident by the work and conversations we had during the final weeks of school.

Our last unit was an Investigative Journalism writing unit, and I decided we would continue a grading practice I started earlier in the year—conference grading. Students had to self-assess and reflect on their pieces before meeting with me in a grading conference. We would review their work together with their assessment checklist and reflection and then decide on a grade together. For this round, I also added a piece that asked them to assess why they should pass the 4th quarter, as we had switched to pass/fail for the remainder of the 2019–2020 school year. In the last 2 weeks of school, I scheduled a conference with each of my students, and many attended. We had some powerful conversations about what they had learned about themselves as students and as people. I listened as they told me about persevering with schoolwork while staying with grandparents or friends as their parents went to work at the hospital each day, battling this new virus. I heard them grieve the loss of their eighth-grade year: the Washington DC trip, graduation, recitals, etc. They opened up about their struggles to remain motivated about school when their video game consoles and the great outdoors were easily accessible. They shared their new strategies for staying organized, managing their time, and staying on top of their work. For me, engaging students in reflection allowed both of us to see how powerful this experience was for them and how much they learned about themselves during it.

Lessons Learned From Remote Teaching and Learning

When I became a teacher in 2010, I never thought I would have to face this specific challenge, which felt unsurmountable at the time. I never considered what it would be like to

teach eighth grade through a computer screen and what it would take to adapt my in-person strategies to Zoom. I also never thought I would have to say goodbye to students I had for 2 years in a video call. It was devastating at first, but, as I look back at it now, I realize I can move forward with some valuable lessons.

Universal Design for Learning Matters Even More

Universal design for learning (UDL, 2022) has been a part of my teaching for several years now, and the engagement principle became integral to how I approached remote teaching. The UDL principles encapsulate everything I want for and from my students, especially those who are remote: engaged, purposeful, motivated, persistent, and reflective. Students who are engaged will be more prepared to persist through the immense challenges of remote learning and will be able to demonstrate their understanding and growth to their teachers. Students who are purposeful and motivated understand the importance of their work and wish to learn and do well on their assignments. Reflection is essential for students to help them regulate their emotional responses. If they reach a level of frustration with a task, they will be able to recognize that, and if they are purposeful, they will be able to access strategies to help them in those moments.

In my remote practice, a choice can be provided at any point in a lesson. For example, something as simple as giving students an option to draft in a Google Doc or a notebook is a start. Many of our remote students are spending hours in front of a screen and getting the opportunity to work on paper may be a welcomed change for students who have a screen headache, prefer to work on paper, or may need to share a device with a sibling or other family member. To turn in their work, they can submit a photo or PDF scan of the notebook page. A small change like this breaks down the barriers to the assignment and allows students to control how they complete their work.

Revisiting Self-Reflection and Grading Practices

Self-reflection and assessment became even more vital to my students as we moved through the end of the 2019–2020 school year, through the 2020–2021 school year, and into this school year. There are multiple ways I incorporate these ideas into my lessons and assessments, including continuing to use conference-style grading. Students use rubrics and checklists to assess their final product and their work ethics, habits, and efforts to prepare for a grading conference. The process helps them identify their strengths and weaknesses and choose areas in which they would like more practice or teaching. As a teacher, talking with each student allows me to plan for whole-group lessons or small-group lessons that revisit and extend the skills on which the assignment is practiced.

Considerations for Future Teaching

As I move forward, I am going to continue to concentrate on the following:

- Make time for student self-reflection and voice.
- Reconsider grading practices: Are my practices capturing compliance or genuine learning and growth?
- Build-in resources and scaffolds to allow students the opportunity to persist through productive struggle.
- Provide options for students in how they learn material and how they demonstrate their learning.

Teaching and learning have been extremely challenging for the past 2½ years, but I learned we can succeed and help ourselves and our students to persist in positive ways through extreme circumstances.

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Social Emotional Learning in Education

Kristie J. Napolitano MA, CAGS

New England College

For comments or questions for the author, contact Kristie J. Napolitano at

knapolitano_gps@nec.edu.

To review and/or listen to Kristie's blog or podcast, go to

https://sites.google.com/view/coviducation/home

Abstract

I will never forget March 13, 2020. There are events people remember for the rest of their lives (e.g., 9/11), and, for me, March 13, 2020, is one of those events. Life changed for almost everyone after March of 2020. Schools closed overnight, and teachers, parents, and students had to adapt to new ways to learn and to support students. This article is one teacher's experiences during the pandemic, and I hope my story and those of my colleagues will help other teachers and parents create hope that life is going to move forward and that teachers, parents, and students are flexible and strong enough to not only survive these trials but also to learn new ways to be strong and successful. I have learned important lessons from my experiences and interactions with my students. The biggest lesson I learned is that social emotional learning is not a nice add-on for teachers and students; it is one of the vital elements of education to give students and teachers the emotional and psychological strength we all need to be successful in life. COVID-19 has demonstrated in vivid and clear ways how important it is for schools to support, teach, and have students learn in ways that assist every member of the school community to feel supported and cared about every day.

Keywords: social emotional learning (SEL), Choose Love (2021), student needs, teacher needs, learning and emotions, social learning

SOCIAL EMOTIONAL LEARNING IN EDUCATION

Imagine the life of a student during a traditional school day. A first grader walking down the hall greeting their teachers with special high-fives, handshakes, hugs, and dances before they enter the classroom. While waiting for morning announcements, older students huddle together discussing their favorite music or television show. A teacher in a third-grade classroom is sitting in a circle with her students leading a mindfulness activity to help students start their day off more focused.

Now, in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic and school closures, educators, students, and parents across the globe are facing a new reality. How are educators supposed to foster a feeling of belonging with students while schools are closed and learning has shifted online? Under these conditions, is it still possible for teachers to maintain strong relationships with their students and keep them engaged in learning?

Starting from the day we left on Friday the 13th and moving to all online learning in 3 days to starting a year off fully remote, to slowly bringing in the grade levels and attempting to have as many students in the building as possible while also following COVID guidelines. Then to the holidays hitting and transitioning back to completely remote learning. When the new year arrived, we transitioned to another model of learning: hybrid. All the while, during every model of learning, teachers' focus has been to keep our students connected to our school emotionally and socially, by integrating social emotional learning (SEL) into our academic learning.

Friday the 13th

The last date I wrote on my white board was Friday, March 13, 2020. This was the last day I saw my class of 2019–2020 third graders. When I said goodbye to them that day, I did not imagine I would be teaching through a computer the rest of the year. The teachers went back to the building the following Monday, and we were trained for the next 3 days on how to use Zoom to teach our class, how to use Google Classroom to assign material and for work we wanted to grade, and how to use Screencastify to record ourselves so students could watch our videos at their convenience. Then, we were sent to our houses with a message to take whatever we thought we would need for teaching. There was no guess of how long, what materials would be helpful, or what we should focus on as most important. A few days later, we were invited back to school for a few hours to gather and make bags for our students. The directions were to give them the math books and school supplies on their desks. If we thought other items would be helpful, we put those in the bags, too.

We started off teaching primarily through Screencastify. We did not use Zoom yet! We posted work and had students submit assignments. Administration asked for every lesson (math, reading, writing) to be recorded so all students had an option to do assignments when it was convenient for them. I did what I could to keep going with the math assignments where we left off. For writing, we tried to continue our animal research projects we had left off on. I was happy I chose to send copies of their organizers and templates home with them. I learned how to use Seesaw as a way for students to record themselves reading to me and sharing their books and the stories they wrote.

Screencastify was interesting to learn. We had to learn about embedding videos and sharing screens. Once we figured this challenge out, we learned how to save to YouTube, create

a YouTube Channel, and upload our videos. After the videos were uploaded, they would be sent to Google Drive. Then, from there, assignments had to be created in Google Classroom where we could put the links to the videos and attach a follow-up assignment to see if students were watching the videos, we spent hours creating. This is when we discovered how helpful Google Forms and Google Docs are. Google Forms were neat because when students answer questions and send them to the teacher, the answers are immediately sent back to the teacher's document. Under a second tab, the teacher can see the response on her copy. Google Docs are helpful because the teacher can work in the same document as the student and help them fix their work as well as leave comments for them on the sides.

Attendance was a huge issue, and work completion was an even bigger concern. The school somehow determined a way to get a Chromebook or computer to any student in the district who needed one. They also found a way to get hotspots for students who needed Wi-Fi. A few weeks into complete remote learning, teachers were trained a bit more on how to work on and run a Zoom meeting. When we felt more comfortable, they challenged us to set our own meetings up and schedule our own meetings with students. In the beginning, we were not expected to teach lessons on Zoom. The idea was to get the students to be able to see our faces and talk to us. We played games and shared what we were doing instead of going places. We got as creative as we could to keep in touch with our students and families.

The biggest challenge at the end of the year was to determine how we were going to grade these students who were abruptly taken away from their classrooms. My district came up with a new grading policy. We dropped all letter grades and chose to grade them on a new scale: LP (limited progress), P (progressing), and D (demonstrating). These were chosen for math, writing, and reading along with a narrative for each subject. We also had two other sections that

included perseverance and problem solving. In conversations with my colleagues, it was clear these narratives were hard for many teachers to write. Who would have guessed spring would be only the beginning of our journey?

Fall 2020

In September, we started fully remote as the administration and school board worked out the kinks of bringing students back to school safely. After they sent surveys to parents, the district outlined Plan A, Plan B, and Plan C. Plan A was school-based instruction that incorporated elements of remote learning and face-to-face instruction. Plan B was the hybrid with limited capacity model. Plan C was complete remote learning.

District-wide staff spent days training and learning more to prepare for all three models of learning. As a result of this pandemic, the district acknowledged the school year would be accompanied by various levels of apprehension, fear, and planning for the unknown. The superintendent promised that this year our educators would be committed to all students and families; the school district would focus on developing and maintaining strong connections with students and families. These connections would be critical in maintaining a focus on the social-emotional well-being of students and enhancing the safety of our school and community environments. Students would be met where they were, and we would all recognize that the transition would challenge everyone in different ways and that we might embrace them in different ways. Consistent communication would be the primary vehicle to lead the teachers, students, and parents through the unpredictable year ahead.

September started out with Plan A, with the option of parents choosing the Alternate Remote Plan (ARP). We started with a phase-in plan for students who would return to onsite learning. Students in grades PreK–2 and Grade 6 started first. Grades 3, 4, and 7 had the first 4

days of school remote and then join the younger grades. Last, the district brought in Grade 5 at the elementary school and Grade 8 at the middle school. In the classrooms, teachers prepared for students with all the new COVID guidelines that had to be followed. Many teachers packed up and brought home years of teaching. We were told the only items in the classroom were student and teacher desks. All tables were taken out of the classrooms and stored in the basement of schools. Administrators got creative and allowed teachers to keep classroom libraries in another room in the school.

Third-grade teachers set up our bookshelves in the art room. All unified arts (UA) teachers had to move on carts to the different classrooms because the administration did not want classroom after classroom to be in the same UA room throughout the day. This made cleaning between classes necessary, which was not possible with only one janitor in the building during the day. Desks in the classrooms were measured out 6 feet apart, and squares were taped on the floors so students knew where the desks belonged. We also gave students a “wiggle square” for movement breaks. Adding in dancing and moving has always been an important part of elementary students' days. We now felt it was even more important to build in these times between lessons where they had to sit in front of a computer.

The next issue to be solved was how to manage snacks, lunch, recess time, moving in the hallways, water bubblers, small group learning, and more. Mask wearing, mask breaks, and the direction desks had to face led to more conversations. We decided if desks were 6 feet away from each other and all facing the same direction, the school would be safely socially distanced. Classroom supplies could no longer be shared, so supply lists were sent home with strict guidelines to label all items and have two separate bags or pencil boxes for art and the classroom.

Chromebooks did not arrive for some students until October due to backups and holds across the country. When we got Chromebooks for all the grade levels part of our learning during the day was to teach them how to use Google Classroom and any sites we planned to use during remote learning. At this point, we did not have remote students Zooming into our classroom. September, October, and the beginning of November went by like a whirlwind. Daily, we watched districts around us move into full remote situations because of the positive cases in their districts. Then, the first positive case was confirmed in our school. We learned all about contact tracing and learned it was the bus seating arrangements that ended up quarantining students from multiple classrooms.

Then we had parents from home who would call and let us know they were COVID positive, and they had to see if the student tested positive, too. We had many students miss 10–14 days due to fever or sniffles. If they chose not to get a COVID test, they had to keep students out for 14 days. This was before we were required to post lessons and assignments on Google Classrooms, but many of the teachers were already stressed about students missing so many days and so many lessons. We started doing both lessons on Google Classroom and for students who were still in school.

Holidays

We did not make it to Thanksgiving without going completely remote. We sent students home with their Chromebooks and any supplies they needed, again not knowing how long this remote learning would last. We stayed remote from Thanksgiving until Christmas. Because we stayed in this model for more than 3 weeks, they disassembled the ARP classes and put all students back into the original classrooms in which they would have started off the year. Teachers made calls to the new families, welcoming them to their new classroom.

Now the remote third-grade students would follow the third-grade schedule in its entirety. Teachers were directed to follow the regular schedule. The core classes in reading, writing, and math had to be live lessons on Zoom, and we were to keep attendance during these lesson times. The day had a Morning Meeting planned that included the Choose Love (2021) material and lessons. The Choose Love Intervention taught SEL skills by incorporating books with SEL themes, songs, and activities. The themes followed the Choose Love formula: Love = Courage + Gratitude + Forgiveness + Compassion in Action. All teachers in the district referenced a monthly calendar the counselors created. Third-grade teachers added more SEL theme books during Reading Workshop, which mixed in mindset themes like grit, perseverance, empathy, flexibility, and optimism.

Unified arts classes, recess, lunch, and intervention blocks were scheduled back in remotely. After a few weeks of this model, the district started to consider switching to a hybrid model. The fully remote students could choose to stay fully remote. The other students would be divided into Cohort 1 and Cohort 2. Cohort 1 would be in class Monday and Thursday. Cohort 2 students would be in school Tuesday and Friday. All students would be remote on Wednesday. Cohort 3 students came 4 days because of special education services, ESOL services, or if remote learning had led them to receive truant letters at home.

Teachers would teach synchronous and asynchronous instruction with a combination of recorded and live instruction for all students. Google Classroom would be incorporated into regular daily instruction. Students and families were given the goal of becoming adept at accessing and using Google Classroom for communication and assignments. Wednesday students had all their main lessons in the morning with independent work in the afternoon.

Teachers spent Wednesday afternoons training and learning how to use technology to ease the complication of teaching some students remotely and some students in school simultaneously.

A few weeks went by, and the district again decided it was time to switch from the Plan B hybrid model to Plan A, which was onsite with a synchronous component for remote students. Now students would be fully onsite with desks spaced at least 3 to 6 feet apart. Face masks and coverings continued to be required, and mask breaks were provided when students could be spaced 6 feet apart. Independent and small group work would be provided to remote students and students in the classroom. Students would now be onsite for 5 days, and remote students would be remote for 5 days. Teachers would continue teaching lessons on Zoom for the students who were remote and the students in the classroom simultaneously.

Social-Emotional Learning

As we embarked on this new world and way of learning, my school district had shown that curriculum is important, schedules are important, and following the COVID guidelines are important, but the social and emotional well-being of our students, families, and all members of the schools tops the list. The Choose Love Movement (2021) has grown over the years and now is an SEL plus program that is free for schools, and schools can teach the curriculum and spread love. This program is aligned with the Character and Social-Emotional Developmental Standards (Character.org, 2022) and includes Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (2022) SEL standards. The advantage of the Choose Love program is how the program includes a variety of important skills to help students build their social-emotional skills through incorporating mindset, neuroscience, mindfulness, positive psychology, posttraumatic growth, and emotional intelligence components. The hope is that students will develop all the social and emotional skills necessary for success in school and after they graduate. These skills and tools

give students a foundation for a healthy, fulfilling, and happy life, even and maybe especially in times like the world has faced for the last 2½ years.

Final Thoughts

What have I learned about teaching and learning during the last 2½ years? First, teachers and students (and probably parents) should think about the social-emotional side of our lives. This pandemic has shown us that students' social and emotional progress has been impaired. I also believe the same is true for teachers and parents. It seems everyone is drained from the devastation of COVID-19. Second, teachers and parents must take care of themselves to take care of our children. We cannot help our children and our students unless we have helped ourselves. Third, other spaces beyond the classroom should really consider the idea of choosing love in our dealings with each other. Hatred, anger, greed, and power appear to be a formula for disaster. I am hopeful teaching students how to be positive, caring, and loving people will give our world a future of cooperation instead of confrontation. Finally, we should not wait for an emergency to be prepared for how to deal with an emergency. Schools should proactively prepare for the next emergency now. We cannot envision every possibility, but we can develop more effective practices so we can adapt more readily to whatever the next emergency will be.

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Equitable Environments During Distance Learning: A Multi-Lens Perspective

Kimberly Hellerich, EdD

East Windsor, CT School District

Rachael Ramsey, EdD

Bedford, NH School District

Carolyn Curtis, EdD, LCSW

Fryeburg Academy, Maine

Abstract

The unprecedented switch to distance learning due to COVID-19 highlighted some social, economic, and learning inequities and presented opportunities for educators to reframe our approaches to learning environments. Through our lenses as a high school teacher, middle level teacher, and high school social worker, we document successful structures and supports to benefit both students and educators. Our recommendations provide real-world strategies to foster equity related to teaching, assessing student work, helping students access EF skills, and establishing social and emotional supports during distance learning. Possible applications of our recommendations include extended absences from school due to a medical condition, extended vacations, school disruptions due to weather anomalies, or additional distance learning experiences due to a pandemic. Due to the COVID-19 crisis in March 2020, the move to distance learning provided opportunities for educators to apply equity-evoking strategies that can be used before, during, and after a pandemic or other instances of distance learning to help all students experience success.

Keywords: assessment, distance learning, equity, executive function skills, instruction, social and emotional health

EQUITABLE ENVIRONMENTS DURING DISTANCE LEARNING: A MULTI-LENS PERSPECTIVE

In March 2020, most schools in the United States closed because of the spread of COVID-19, also known as Coronavirus (Lieberman, 2020; Will, 2020). Within this unprecedented situation described as an "experiment with distance learning" (Sawchuck, 2020, para. 1), many schools did not have the capacity to provide substantive online instruction (Lieberman, 2020, para. 3). As educators, we recognize how this situation exacerbated and raised challenges pertaining to delivering equitable educational experiences. Through our lenses as a high school teacher, a middle level teacher, and a high school social worker, we have seen successful structures and supports to benefit both students and educators.

Distance learning due to COVID-19 highlighted some inequities and opportunities for educators to reframe our approach to learning environments. Our recommendations apply beyond the COVID-19 pandemic; they can apply to other situations when distance learning is required. Possible applications include extended absences from school due to a medical condition, extended vacations, school disruptions due to weather anomalies, or additional distance learning experiences due to a pandemic. As presented in our article, the selected format presents information as before, during, and after moving to distance learning. This deliberate choice allows readers to experience elements that reflect best practices, which can provide more equitable opportunities and learning environments for students.

In the first section of this article, K-12 Distance Teaching and Assessment: Lessons Learned From Higher Education, Dr. Hellerich highlights how K–12 educators can learn from the lessons experienced by our higher education colleagues regarding successful instruction and assessment strategies during distance learning. In the second section, Functioning at Home in a

Crisis: Executive Skills for School, Dr. Ramsey shares strategies to create a classroom environment that moves students toward independence and problem solving. The strategies suggested can be modified for any age level and help transition to distance learning. In Section 3 of the article, Stuck at Home: Changing (and Sometimes Challenging) Learning Environments, Dr. Curtis describes how care, compassion, and connection act as antidotes to some of the social challenges students face during distance learning. We understand changes to the learning environment can be stressful for students and staff, and we hope this article provides information that can be incorporated immediately into distance learning to work toward achieving equity.

SECTION I

K-12 DISTANCE TEACHING AND ASSESSMENT: LESSONS LEARNED FROM HIGHER EDUCATION

Kimberly Hellerich, EdD

For comments or questions for the author, contact Kimberly Hellerich at khellerich@nec.edu

The abrupt transition to distance learning due to COVID-19 left many teachers "in limbo," as some schools lacked technological infrastructure and concerns related to meeting special education students' needs (Will, 2020). Although transitioning to online learning challenged many K–12 teachers to plan equitable instruction and assessments, one could view our collective situation as a prime opportunity. As educators, we have the chance to learn from higher education colleagues who successfully experienced both the planning and delivery of online instruction.

Before Moving to Distance Learning: Integrate Best Practices

Several instructional best practices for K–12 and higher education educators include timely feedback, opportunities for student choice, providing rubrics and models of exemplars,

and authentic learning tasks; these best practice strategies readily apply to online instruction (Kerr, 2011). Best practices apply at all levels, extending from K–12 to higher education. Historically, concerns have been raised about students with disabilities experiencing curriculum equitably in an online forum (Basham et al., 2015). However, best practices such as universal design for learning (UDL) can address educational online equity concerns.

Universal Design for Learning

From a pedagogical perspective, equity can be achieved through teachers' integration of UDL via clear goals, differentiating outcomes from means, modeling, and personal connections (CAST Professional Learning, 2015; Rose, 2014). UDL has been integrated in higher education (Burke et al., 2016; Wood, 2011) as well as in some states for K–12 instruction, such as Kentucky (Ender et al., 2007). UDL allows teachers to address accessibility, particularly using technological tools, including adaptive equipment such as screen readers, audio, voice recognition software, adaptive keyboards, and transcription (Burke et al., 2016). Additional examples include alternative text (descriptions for images and graphics), closed captioning, text layout, embedding links, and voice typing (Moorefield-Lang, 2019). If K–12 educators integrate UDL concepts and tools within curricula when situated within a traditional school building, then moving to distance learning can support all students' learning experiences more seamlessly.

Blended Learning

As a best practice, blended learning has been described as a "fundamental redesign" of instructional delivery that can integrate technology within formative and summative assessments (Watson, 2008) and "can vary in a lot of different ways" (p. 14). This variation provides teachers flexibility when integrating technology to enhance instruction. Establishing a blended learning environment prior to online distance learning can allow proper support practices and

technologies to be available, which is important (Basham et al., 2015). Further, blended learning offers the opportunity for students and staff to become familiar with technological tools, including their district's learning management systems (e.g., Google, Microsoft) that would be available when schools move abruptly to distance learning.

Assessment Best Practices

Assessment best practices can strive toward achieving equity by being authentic, providing feedback by being formative, and offering options for students' choice. Authentic assessment sponsors students' abilities to acquire knowledge through their products (Wiggins, 1990). As Milner (2018) noted, equity can be achieved when assessments gauge student learning, development, improvement over time, and "perhaps most important are as diverse as the students who take them" (para. 9, number 5). These equity elements can be addressed via formative assessments that inform instruction, which can include opportunities for discussion. Assessment best practices can support achieving equity.

During Distance Learning: Learn From Higher Education's Lessons

Online learning has dominated higher education over the past decade, holding to the same effective instruction principles regardless of the delivery mode of teaching (Orlando, 2011). The research, successes, and challenges our higher education colleagues experienced can assist K–12 teachers to transition successfully to online distance learning during a pandemic. When it is necessary to move to online learning, we can lean on higher education's prior experiences. Moving to online learning allows us to learn two lessons previously experienced by higher education instructors.

Lesson 1: Successful Instructional Delivery

When relying on distance learning, teachers must be mindful of cognitive load (Vanderbilt University, 2020), given the increase in online reading (Clem, 2004) within a "text-heavy environment" (Cavanaugh et al., 2004). The potential for increased cognitive load provides additional concerns for some students with disabilities. Teachers can address these concerns by presenting content in clear-to-read formats, using accessible and mobile-friendly formats such as PDF (Rice University Center for Teaching Excellence, 2020), and providing consistency in presentation of material (Burke et al., 2016). Further, cognitive load can be reduced when teachers chunk text into smaller segments (Guyan, 2013), align words and pictures, and present words as narration, also known as "offloading" (Mayer & Moreno, 2003). These presentation formats will benefit students' interactions with texts and reduce cognitive load.

Further, reducing the amount of required reading, being lenient with due dates, and holding synchronous review sessions can help students (Vanderbilt University, 2020). Offering flexibility, adaptability, and relevance within instructional activities will support inclusive and equitable access to learning (McLoughlin, 2001). Further, flexibility with respect to pacing instructional assignments can also benefit gifted students (Olszewski-Kubilius & Corwith, 2010). Flexibility can benefit successful delivery of instruction in an online learning environment.

Lesson 2: Adjustable Assessment Practices

Teachers can readily transfer their best practices for assessment, with some potential (slight) adjustments during remote learning. As reflected by our higher education colleagues, K–12 teachers can offer timeline flexibility and assessment alternatives (Rice University Center for Teaching Excellence, 2020). Students will benefit from choice, alternate options, and a flexible

timeline. As teachers, we can also heavily emphasize discussions, especially as formative assessments (Orlando, 2011); in this respect, technology integration can benefit formatives. Options for teachers' consideration include using synchronous or asynchronous online discussions, individualized feedback, and opportunities to rework assignments by applying a flexible, growth mindset with assessments. Teachers should consider these strategies because online direct instruction is limited compared to instructing in a face-to-face classroom environment.

When moving to distance learning during the COVID-19 pandemic, the issue of grading arose. According to Sawchuck (2020), states and district approaches varied. Recognizing many students will not have adequate access to their teachers' direct input, varied levels of student-teacher interactions resulted. Equity concerns arose due to students' unequal access to technology, resulting in varied access to teachers. As noted, realities associated with grading existed across states and districts; grades represented a range of concepts, including motivation, content mastery information, and comparison for college applications. In response, some districts emphasized feedback, rather than traditional grades, to resolve equity concerns (Sawchuck, 2020).

To address equity concerns during the COVID-19 pandemic, another grading approach was suggested in some states, including Connecticut. Connecticut's education officials advocated using a pass/fail grading system as "the best way to address grading as districts grapple with their first forays into distance learning" (Rondinone & Goode, 2020, para. 2). The Connecticut State Department of Education supported

> the growing national consensus that, given the variability of online teaching and learning models, and issues of access and equity, it is appropriate to view the second half of the

> 2020 school year as a special case in terms of grading, GPAs and transcripts. (Rondinone & Goode, 2020, para. 3)

Yet, the decision to use pass/fail grading was a suggestion and ultimately remained within each individual district's purview. Because it was only a recommendation, continued variability and equity concerns existed across the state.

Furthermore, according to Gaytan (2004), during distance learning, teachers should gather student feedback about their learning experiences. Higher education instructors have learned gathering information from students allows teachers to make important adjustments. Surveying students during online instruction about the quality of their learning experience is important in higher education (Gaytan, 2004) and readily applies to K–12 distance learning. As shared by Washington State Superintendent, Michelle Reid, asking students their thoughts during a distance learning course can lead to a "two-way learning street" (as cited in Lieberman, 2020, para. 8). Engaging with students about their experiences will strengthen positive teacher-student relationships further, which can readily reconnect relationships when returning to school after distance learning concludes.

After Distance Learning: Return to Best Practices, Plus . . .

After distance learning concludes, continuing with best practices for instruction and assessment can ease the return to the traditional classroom. To support students' adjustment from remotely focused work, teachers can amplify student-centered instructional strategies to reestablish classroom environments. For instance, K–12 teachers can engage student-led class discussions, possibly as formative assessments; these discussions can allow students to reconnect socially, especially after a potentially prolonged absence from school. Using blended instruction that integrates technology meaningful can continue to support student learning. Also, educators

should consider continuing their use of surveys to gather student feedback. Gauging students' perceptions of instructional activities and assessments to ease the transition back to the traditional classroom can inform K–12 planning and instruction.

Summary

As Cavanaugh et al. (2004) noted, the "optimal learning situation still involves the physical presence of a teacher" (p. 6). However, in a time of crisis such as a pandemic that requires teachers to instruct and assess remotely, teachers can rest assured best practices they integrate in their classrooms can translate to online distance learning. Equity in instruction and assessment does necessitate being "equal"; equity can be achieved through much-needed accessibility, flexibility, and adaptability. Still, implementing effective instruction and assessment strategies can occur, despite the delivery method. K–12 teachers can learn from the lessons our higher education colleagues experienced. As educators, we can share our online instruction successes—collectively.

Recommendations

When resorting to distance learning, we offer several recommendations. When integrating the following recommendations, K–12 teachers can strive to achieve equity in their instruction and assessment by following the ABCDs:

A. Authentic assessment: applies before, during, and after instruction
B. Blend technology into instruction: makes for a more seamless transition to distance learning
C. Create flexibility: activities, timelines, provide timely feedback before grading
D. Differentiate using UDL: Allow reworking assignments, survey students to gain input, and adapt activities to suit their needs/interests

SECTION II

FUNCTIONING AT HOME IN A CRISIS: EXECUTIVE SKILLS FOR "SCHOOL"

Rachael Ramsey, EdD

For comments or questions for the author, contact Rachael Ramsey at rramsey_gps@nec.edu

Executive function (EF) skills are those skills identified to help individuals reflect on past choices, plan ahead, and refrain from blurting out responses (Dawson & Guare, 2018; Diamond, 2015; Zelazo et al., 2014). These skills can be seen when a student begins a task without prompting or completes a long-term project on time. An example of response inhibition is waiting until being called on in class. These skills are reflected in classroom activities each day. The more educators think about including these skills in lesson plans, the more students are set up for academic success and creativity.

Before Moving to Distance Learning: Helping Students Access and Develop EF skills

Current school organization stems from someone else's choices filtering down to the students in classrooms. Educators at various levels drive school structure. All this structure influences the level of EF skills students are encouraged to practice and develop. In addition to school structures, there is also a socioeconomic influence on a student's EF skill access prior to arriving at school (Hackman et. al, 2015).

EF skills access does not happen in a vacuum. A positive mindset allows access to the prefrontal cortex where EF skills provide students opportunities to also be creative (Diamond, 2015). The various levels of knowledge of EF skills access among educators varies as much as use of learning management systems (LMS) and opportunities for students to practice these skills during the school day. There is a plethora of opportunities to practice EF skills independently in blended classrooms and LMS. These issues together can create a level of inequity.

Students need opportunities to practice EF skills structured in daily classroom activities. The only way to develop EF skills is to practice (Dawson & Guare, 2018; Diamond, 2013; Zelazo et al., 2010). Practicing EF skills will look different depending upon students' age; however, any age student can and should continue to develop their EF skills. There are ways to incorporate EF skills into any school activity.

EF Skills

An essential EF subskill is the ability to reflect on how one is doing in relation to a goal (Dawson & Guare, 2018). Students can reflect at the end of the lesson with an exit ticket or closure activity. Instead of asking students as a whole group, have students "rate" themselves individually. How well did they stay focused? How did they handle frustration today? What could they do differently tomorrow? What worked well for them today? Rating scales could be stars, faces, a number system, or any other rating scale students develop. These are just a few ways to help students reflect and practice EF skills.

Student choice also provides opportunities for EF skill practice. Metacognition is defined as thinking about thinking (Dawson & Guare, 2018). Students can be provided time to reflect on their own progress toward a goal. Although this time may feel "lost" in terms of curriculum, the more students practice metacognition, the more time is left for academic content in the future because metacognition, reflecting on one's progress, becomes habitual. The more students use metacognition, the more they practice problem solving in situations with less structure.

EF Profiles Are Unique

A one size fits all EF model will not be successful in any environment. Various forms of task checklists provide opportunities for students to practice using skills such as goal-directed persistence, sustained attention, task initiation, and more (Dawson & Guare, 2018). Task

checklists can be modified to match students' developmental levels. A checklist can look like a picture of an elephant with pictures of activities that need to be completed. A younger student could color the segments in and visually see progress toward a goal. The same image of an elephant could be used with an adolescent student who chooses to break down the steps in a long-term project. With the middle level student, an adult may include the steps or allow the student to create the steps with some assistance. A high school student may choose to create a checklist with checkboxes for assignments needed to be completed. An educator's relationship with a student allows the teacher to tailor EF practices with the student. The more teachers provide EF practice and structure in a classroom, the more those skills become habitual (Dawson & Guare, 2018; Diamond, 2015; Zelazo et al., 2014).

Allow students to choose the option that works best for them. The choice may inspire them to have fun while completing a task. For example, an artist may enjoy drawing parts of the elephant after completing a math problem. Educators are adept at modifying strategies to meet the needs of the students learning with them in the classroom. EF skills are similar in nature. If educators also provide opportunities for students to share their strategies, it highlights that each person is unique and there is no one-size-fits-all strategy. Adults need to craft EF checklists or other tasks to provide choices to best meet the unique needs of the learners in their classroom.

During Distance Learning: The Most Beneficial EF Subskills in a Crisis

From my experiences during the pandemic, I have found although all EF skills are important, there are four essential skills for students to learn in a crisis. Those vital EF skills include flexibility, metacognition, task initiation, and essential habits.

Flexibility

Flexibility is defined as the ability to shift as circumstances change to achieve a goal (Dawson & Guare, 2018; Diamond, 2013). Educators and students were sent home with various supports to have "school" at home. This new school required a new schedule, new tools, new locations, and new strategies. Students on the autism spectrum have more challenges with this EF subskill (Dawson & Guare, 2018). Even for students who may have the ability to be flexible, asking students to access an LMS such as Google Classroom or Schoology at home in a new "school" setting can be an insurmountable challenge.

Metacognition

Metacognition is asked of every student in the middle of a crisis whether they log on to a computer or open a paper packet. Students need to decide on a goal, how they will achieve that goal, and whether they have achieved that goal. This type of goal setting may need to be done without any adult assistance for some students when at home. With distance learning, there may be more time for all students to reflect as there are no time constraints when "moving" from class to class. They may have more time to evaluate what they would do differently next time.

Task Initiation

Task initiation is another crucial EF subskill when working from home. Task initiation is the ability to begin a task perceived to be challenging (Dawson & Guare, 2018). Educators are aware of which students struggle to begin tasks at school; however, not everyone who struggled with task initiation will struggle at home. There may be students who surprise teachers by struggling to begin or complete assignments from home. It is essential to monitor who is responding and who may be "missing" from distance learning. Students may need more support

to begin, or there is another issue that needs to be addressed for students to begin within remote learning.

Essential Habits

Many EF skills developed or accessed before a crisis may be a challenge to access amid whatever crisis created distance learning. When learning a new skill, there is even less "brain space" to access EF skills (Diamond, 2015). Stress and negative emotions can inhibit prefrontal cortex access during a crisis. Students will rely upon habits. Habits take up less brain energy as students apply them "automatically" (Duhigg, 2012). There may not be room to learn a new concept and use EF skills. The before classroom structure will influence students' EF skill access during the crisis.

During the crisis, it is imperative to remember that the educator may need to be a "surrogate prefrontal cortex" (Dawson & Guare, 2018; Diamond, 2015). It may be unrealistic to expect students to problem solve at the same precrisis level. Something simple may become a larger hurdle. Working memory may be poorer and emotional control may become weaker (Buckner & Kim, 2012). Educators' EF skills may be in a similar state. Teachers need to recognize our own challenges, acknowledge them with our students, and talk out how we can problem solve together. That is a way to model what happens when a teacher's prefrontal cortex is struggling to "unlock."

After Distance Learning: Lessons Learned for Later

There are lessons we can take from the COVID-19 pandemic to help students in the future. There are opportunities to address gaps instantly highlighted due to distance learning. Distance learning strengthens the importance of how we structure learning in the brick-and-mortar school. We can choose to include EF skills into lesson plans, classroom structure, and

mini lessons intentionally throughout the school year. The more practice students have in a positive classroom setting, the easier it is to shift to the necessary independence with any potential school disruptions if EF skills are habitual.

Periods of distance learning may come at random times and are EF authentic assessments. As challenging as these situations are, they provide teachers feedback and opportunities to learn. Educators can use our own metacognition, and, if we are lucky, come back together with that group of students to find out what helped them, what they wished they knew, and what they would do differently with a "redo" button. Teachers can use this information to continue to drive our instruction the following school year. In a sense, there is a "redo" button to grow as educators.

Recommendations

It is my hope that this list sparks ideas for you. You know your class, your community, and the students' culture better than anyone. Think about how you can incorporate some of these ideas into your classroom structure. It is never an all or nothing with EF skills. If you can help students to access or practice EF skills a little more that may have a long-lasting influence in their lives as people.

"Fun" Activities

"Fun" activities provide the backdrop for EF skill practice. Games can appear as though they are "just fun." Play and games is hard work and rehearsal for life situations (Diamond, 2013). Brain teasers, puzzles, or games of any kind are strong opportunities for the EF subskills of cognitive flexibility, sustained attention, and goal-directed persistence. EF skills access varies, so be sure to know when to push a student's thinking. This is no different than it is with any other skill or strategy.

Music, singing, dancing, creating, and other physical activities are outstanding for EF skill practice. Diamond (2013) created a study examining the influence of the arts on EF skills. She found students within arts programs showed amazing EF skills access. Response inhibition and sustained attention are necessary when practicing with the arts (Diamond, 2013).

Semantics Matters

How we say or ask something changes the level of EF skills needed. For example, if a teacher says to a student, "Go get a pencil," the teacher has given a directive with no thinking on the part of the student. It is based upon compliance and the student's EF skill access. If the educator asks the question, "Do you have a pencil?" the student now needs to access EF skills. This takes time to practice as an educator, but it allows for more EF skill practice within typical daily conversations.

The last element is to help students reflect on how actions and decisions influence the people around them (Grant, 20017). For students to think about how others feel, they need to know their feelings and actions matter to us as educators (Minor, 2019). Using a tool such as the Executive Skills Questionnaire-Revised (ESQ-R; Dawson & Guare, 2018) provides opportunities to think about EF strengths and weaknesses. Educators can then provide appropriate support for students.

Summary

The more we can create a classroom structure that allows students to be brave, have choice, and know teachers are there for them, the more students will access EF skills and continue to develop those skills. Why does this matter? It matters because the next time there is a crisis, our goal as educators is for our students to know they have tools at their disposal to help

them succeed in distance learning. Students accessing EF skills means they have more of what they need before they turn on that computer or open that packet.

It is up to educators in classrooms to work on the smaller scale of creating equitable "classrooms" during a crisis. Although there are many elements beyond an educator's control, what we do prior to a crisis can aid our students both during and after the crisis has abated. We may be able to change the system for all, but we can create a colossal change for our students.

SECTION III

STUCK AT HOME: CHANGING (AND SOMETIMES CHALLENGING) LEARNING ENVIRONMENTS

Carolyn Curtis, EdD, LCSW

For comments or questions for the author, contact Carolyn Curtis at ccurtis1@nec.edu.

When schools shift to distance learning, students find themselves in completely new learning environments as siblings and pets become classmates and parents/guardians become teachers, advisors, and principals. For some students, this transition to a new learning environment comes as a welcome relief where the stress of trying to navigate the social pressures of schools immediately dissipates. Other students struggle with the change in learning environments. Some students may face additional stressors such as loneliness and unhealthy family relationships with the potential for increased exposure to domestic violence and/or abuse. This section covers the social struggles of distance learning and provides strategies for how to mitigate the difficulties of potentially challenging learning environments at home.

Loneliness and Social Isolation

When schools switch to distance learning, students lose the opportunity to engage in daily in-person interactions with their friends, classmates, and trusted school adults. People are social

beings, wired to connect with others, and feel pain when social connections become threatened (Lieberman, 2013). Being physically isolated at home puts students at risk for developing feelings of loneliness and having lower levels of academic achievement. Social pain leads to reduction in test scores and the ability to focus on academic work (Lieberman, 2013). Social isolation and loneliness for children is associated with poor physical health (Caspi et al., 2006), increased mental health struggles (Matthews et al., 2015), and impaired executive functioning skills (Hawkley & Capitanio, 2015).

Feelings of loneliness during childhood can have a lasting effect on students. Students who experienced loneliness as children were predisposed to develop symptoms of depression as adolescents (Qualter et al., 2009) and were part of a lower socioeconomic class as adults (Lacey et al., 2014), which may perpetuate educational disparities in the next generation as children with lower socioeconomic status have lower levels of academic achievement (Ferguson, 2007). Social isolation and feelings of loneliness have negative and potentially lasting impacts on students' physical, mental, and academic health and well-being.

Unhealthy Relationships at Home

With distance learning and recommendations to distance physically from others, students often become isolated to their homes and significantly increase their contact with family members who may be working from home or facing unemployment. For some students, this increased family contact may promote healthy bonding and engagement in family activities. For other students, this increased family contact may result in increased exposure to domestic violence, neglect, or physical, emotional, or sexual abuse.

Many of our students have been or will be exposed to domestic violence. Approximately 1 in 4 children and adolescents are exposed to at least one form of family violence (Dong et al.,

2004; Hamby et al., 2011). Approximately 15% of children experience maltreatment, such as physical abuse, emotional abuse, neglect, and custodial interference each year, and approximately 38% of youth have experienced at least one lifetime instance of child maltreatment (Finkelhor et al., 2015). Exposure to violence and abuse is associated with increased risk of psychological, social, emotional, and behavioral struggles for children and adolescents (Wathen & Macmillan, 2013).

Several states have indicated reports of child abuse and neglect dropped approximately 50% in the first weeks of school closures during the COVID-19 pandemic (Eldeib, 2020; Moran, 2020). Unfortunately, this reduction in reports most likely does not coincide with a reduction in actions of abuse or neglect but rather from students no longer reporting such abuse to school staff. During just 1 week of distance learning, doctors in one hospital reported seeing the same number of severe child abuse cases typically seen over the course of 1 month (CBS DFW, 2020). History has shown domestic violence cases increase in times of prolonged stress such as financial crises or natural disasters (Andrew, 2020). This means, during periods of distance learning, in addition to increased feelings of loneliness, students may be more at risk for domestic violence, abuse, or neglect, without having the typical support of trusted adults or the safety net of school.

Before Moving to Distance Learning: **The Power of Care**

Many of the recommendations of what to do to help prepare students prior to entering distance learning periods can be incorporated into SEL lessons/activities throughout the school year. One suggestion is to create a self-care folder for each student. Prior to going into vacations, distance learning periods, or extended absences from school, students can review the resources in their folders and perhaps even take their folders home.

Create a Care List

- For younger students: Ask students to draw pictures of and list names of the people who care about them and who they can go to for help. Make sure students know how to access those people remotely.
- For older students: Many social media platforms develop lists of people, such as top friends or streaks, so ask students to list who are in their top friends or streaks, or if they do not have social media, who they think would be. Then ask students who they would reach out to if they were struggling and how to reach out to people remotely.

Create a Self-Care Plan

- For younger students: Read a book where characters use coping strategies to overcome a challenge. Discuss what strategies the characters used. Have students create their own self-care plan of coping strategies. This can include items such as healthy eating, being active, spending time outside, art, doing yoga, playing with a pet, positive self-talk (i.e. “I can do this”), breathing exercises (i.e. breathe in your nose while pretending to smell the flowers and breathe out your mouth pretending to blow out the birthday candles).
- For older students: Discuss personal triggers and identify coping strategies. It is important to talk about maintaining aspects of physical health such as sleep, hygiene, exercise, and eating well. Have students create their own self-care plan of coping strategies. This can include items such as taking a break from screens/social media, spending time outside when possible, making art, listening to music, doing yoga, caring for a pet, using positive self-talk (i.e. “I have people who care about me”), meditating, using breathing exercises such as square breathing (breathe in to the count

of 4, hold for the count of 4, breathe out to the count of 4, hold for the count of 4, and repeat).

Provide a List of Crisis Resources

- For younger students: If possible, read a story about a child needing help and getting help. Talk with students about different scenarios where they may need help. Depending on the students, perhaps even roleplay different situations. Make sure all students know how to dial 911 and when they would need to do so. Some students may not have access to a phone, so it is important to review other options as well such as going to a safe neighbor's house.
- For older students: Discuss different crises with students when they could need help. Provide a list of crisis hotlines/helplines such as crisis text number (741-741), domestic violence (1-800-799-7233), and suicide prevention (1-800-273-8255). Have students save these numbers into their cell phones if they have one. Many websites also provide opportunities to chat with someone online, such as domestic violence (https://www.thehotline.org/help/) and suicide prevention (https://suicidepreventionlifeline.org/). These chat opportunities might feel more confidential for students who are home and might not want someone to overhear their phone calls.

Develop a Safe Code Phrase

With distance learning, many students will not have a private place where they can communicate any instances of abuse, neglect, or domestic violence. Teachers should assume someone will be in the same room with students or will be going through their electronic

communication; therefore, it is best to come up with a code phrase that students can use to communicate any abuse, neglect, or domestic violence safely.

- For younger students: Review with students some possible situations about when they would need to share about something bad that happened to them. Come up with a code phrase that students can use to indicate abuse and the person who harmed them, such as "I really miss the school cookies. I wish my dad could make me cookies"). Make sure this phrase is ordinary enough that anyone listening in would not be able to catch on. It can be helpful to connect the phrase to an image like a cookie, so when preparing work for distance learning, include a picture of the object to remind the students of the phrase.
- For older students: Talk with students about how being home for extended periods might strain relationships with family members. Make sure students know they can still communicate about any unsafe/abusive experiences and still receive support from their trusted adults at school. Come up with a phrase that students can use to indicate abuse and the person who harmed them such as, "I can't find my health book. I will need to ask my mom to help me look for it."

During Distance Learning: The Power of Compassion

We can still help reduce loneliness for students and help with any potential safety concerns around violence or abuse during distance learning periods. Here are some recommendations:

Focus on Compassion

It is important to remind students we still care about them even when they are not in school. Stay in frequent contact through emails, phone calls, video conferencing, etc.

Know When to Be Concerned About Student Safety

Here are some potential warning signs of abuse:

- Seeing any unexplained bruises/injuries
- Seeing the student frequently look over their shoulder/around the room as if they are hyper-alert to another person's presence
- Hearing a parent/guardian belittle, humiliate, or yell at the student
- Noticing withdrawal/disengagement of the student
- Noticing any significant changes in behavior or appearances
- Having students shift their sleep-wake cycles to be awake at night when other family members are asleep to avoid conflict/arguments with family

Know How to Respond to Safety Concerns

If teachers recognize any potential signs of safety concerns, we must follow up on them. School officials are still mandated reporters and need to call and report any suspicions of abuse, even if we have not confirmed the abuse. Here are a few different scenarios and how to respond:

a. For any potential warning signs of abuse, call the state child protective services and report suspicions of child abuse or neglect.
b. If a student uses their code phrase, ask "Right now?" If a student says "Yes," call 911. If a student says, "No," call your state child protective services and file a report of suspicions of abuse.
c. If a student is not responding to any check-ins or scheduled class meetings, and no one has had any contact with the student, notify an administrator. They may need to call the local police to do a well-child check.

After Distance Learning: The Power of Connections

Connections matter to students, and returning the classroom is a great opportunity to remind students the adults in the school care about them. Here are some recommendations:

Focus on Connections

When students return to the classroom, it is important for them to feel welcomed back, whether it is greeting each student at the door or having a personalized note on their desk. Celebrate the return to school through hosting a birthday party for all students who had their birthday during distance learning or hold a welcome back party that students helped plan during distance learning.

Expect Challenging Behaviors

Students may react differently to returning to school, and teachers may see some changes in how they act. Some students may be upset to have to come back to school, and some may be overjoyed. Educators might see an increase in acting out/externalizing behaviors or shutting down/internalizing behaviors. Some students may be angry at their parents and take out their frustrations on adults at school; they may have taken the absence of in-person support as a sign of rejection or a lack of interest in them. It is important to remember during the transition back to be patient with students.

Establish (New) Routines

Students do well with consistency, and, during distance learning, some students lacked the structure schools provide. It is important to establish routines quickly upon the return to school. These routines should support students' social emotional needs in addition to their learning needs through activities such as starting the day with a morning circle or some mindfulness, building in time for yoga or movement breaks, creating a calming/cool-down

corner in the classroom, or playing soothing music during small group work. Returning from distance learning can be an opportunity to reflect on what was and was not working and implement new strategies to support and promote student growth.

Recommendations

Students learn best when they have trusting relationships with their teachers. Prior to, during, and after episodes of distance learning, a focus on the three Cs may help all students:

- Care: Nurture the social, emotional, and academic growth of all students.
- Compassion: Understand the impact of social environments on students.
- Connections: Foster supportive relationships with students to aid in their well-being.

Summary

During times of distance learning, students encounter a change in their learning environments. Although some students may flourish with this change, others may struggle with feelings of isolation or the potential exposure to abuse, neglect, or unhealthy relationships at home. Teachers can still help make the environment conducive to learning while maintaining student wellbeing through remaining connected to students. As Lieberman (2013) stated, "Increasing the social connections in our lives is probably the single easiest way to enhance well-being" (p. 250). Care, compassion, and connections can make all the difference for students isolated at home during periods of distance learning or extended absences from school.

Conclusion: Viewing Equity Through a Multi-Lens Perspective

Due to the COVID-19 crisis in March 2020, the move to distance learning provided opportunities for educators to apply equity-evoking strategies that can be used before, during, and after pandemic or other instances of distance learning. The authors' recommendations provide real-world strategies to foster equity-related to teaching, assessing student work, helping

students access EF skills, and establishing social and emotional supports during distance learning. Educators recognize students come to school with varying skill levels and different backgrounds. Although instances of distance learning may highlight some of those inequities, such as access to technology, internet, food, and housing, teachers can still maintain an equity lens during challenging times. From a whole-child perspective, if educators use the recommended strategies, it is possible students will be more supported during distance learning, allowing all students to succeed (see Appendix for more resources).

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Appendix

Online Resources

Authentic Assessment

Grant Wiggins (on *Edutopia*, April 3, 2006): https://www.edutopia.org/authentic-assessment-grant-wiggins

Grant Wiggins: Defining Assessment *(on Edutopia,* January 21, 2002*)*:

https://www.edutopia.org/grant-wiggins-assessment

University of Delaware: Case for Authentic Assessment:

https://ctal.udel.edu/resources/the-case-for-authentic-assessment/

Rice University. (n.d.). *Teaching in times of crisis.*

https://s3.amazonaws.com/vu-wp0/wp-content/uploads/sites/59/2010/06/02133828/crisis.pdf

UDL

Guidelines: http://udlguidelines.cast.org/

Frequently Asked Questions (with hyperlinks):

http://udlguidelines.cast.org/more/frequently-asked-questions

Framework: https://www.cast.org/impact/universal-design-for-learning-udl

Crisis Resources: Stuck at Home: Changing (and Sometimes Challenging) Learning Environments

Crisis text number: (741-741)

Domestic violence: (1-800-799-7233) Help for Abusive Behaviors | The National Domestic Violence Hotline (thehotline.org)

Suicide prevention: (1-800-273-8255) Lifeline (suicidepreventionlifeline.org)