Equity Dispatch

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Did You Know | Why It Matters | For Equity Now

Virtual Realities: Equity Considerations for Online & Distance Learning

Collectively, we can work together as an education community to ensure that the civil rights of students are protected and all youth, particularly those who are historically marginalized, experience caring, inclusive, safe, and equitable learning opportunities during this pandemic.

- Midwest & Plains Equity Assistance Center

Did You Know
Educational Equity Matters in Virtual Spaces, Too

COVID-19 has left educational communities in a state of uncertainty, particularly about the future of returning to brick-and-mortar schooling spaces. Schools across the country and world made an abrupt shift to online/distance learning, with students, educators, and families adjusting to and accounting for new methods of learning: access to technology, school supplies, and the negotiation of time, space, and energy. Not surprisingly, these adjustments have amplified existing systemic inequities, (in)directly affecting the school system. For example, although students with disabilities should still receive focused services, honoring IEPs and classroom accommodations have proven difficult in the virtual setting, disrupting accessibility and routine (Grayer et al., 2020). Additionally, many families needing to navigate learning management systems (LMS) and online learning applications (apps), technologies they may not be familiar with, also amplifies the digital divide related to online and distance strategies and formalized education.

COVID-19 health disparities, the increased and exacerbated instances of food insecurity, and disruptions in learning from lack of access to WIFI and technology, disproportionately affect minoritized[1] students and families. Further, families working from home is a privilege; "essential workers," defined as those individuals who are critical to day-to-day societal infrastructure (Waterfield, 2020) tend to come from lower-income households, have heavier financial burdens, and are more at risk for contracting COVID-19 due to consistent exposure to the public (Kearney & Muñana, 2020; Waterfield, 2020). It is pertinent to address how educators and other members of the educational community can unite towards remedying these sustained oppressions, lessening the burdens on families.

We would be remiss if we did not speak to the COVID-19 pandemic intersecting with the heightened instances of racially-motivated violence students experience daily—either through media or through personal encounters. Fighting for racial equity and justice are ongoing occurrences, and one of the reasons Equity Assistance Centers exist (Jackson et al., 2018). The resulting civil resistance is an opportunity to address systemic racism in the learning environment, incorporating anti-racism into our praxis in preparation for the upcoming school year.

While addressing these inequities, it is critical to be cognizant of the tone and tenor of our conversations about minoritized communities, being careful to not position students as deficient as educators discuss support efforts. Conversations between education leaders centered on what minoritized students and their families need often spiral, forgetting that minoritized students and their families, too, have inherent skills and knowledge that is critically beneficial to both the online learning environment, as well as in other distance learning activities, *outweighing* their perceived deficits.

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[1]E.g. individuals who identify as LGBTQ+, non-binary, women, disabled, non-Christian, people of Color, and/or emergent multilingual individuals—and intersections of these identities.

Educators are in positions to be empowering for students, foregrounding culturally responsive and sustaining practices (Coomer, et al. 2018; Jackson, et al., 2015; Moore, et al., 2015; Paris, 2012) in the online and distance learning sphere, striking a balance between instruction, and creating spaces for students to exercise their expertise of their lived experiences. Specifically, capitalizing on students' funds of knowledge (Moll et al., 1992) allows students to "form their own identities and develop counternarratives to contrast or more accurately deconstruct often negative and oppressive representations about students of color, students with dis/abilities, students who identify as LGBTQ or other nondominant identity markers" (Moore et al., 2015, p. 3; Solorzano & Yosso, 2002). For the first time, many students are in a hybrid home/school space, with the opportunity to engage the assets in their physical home contexts as real-time learning spaces, rich in knowledge. In this way, we can begin to move away from the current COVID-19 conversations that are steeped in students' "need," and shift to language which capitalize on their assets, positioning minoritized students' cultural practices as invaluable. Both funds of knowledge and culturally sustaining pedagogy work together to respect minoritized students' lived experiences as asset-based, rigorous, and legitimate units of analysis.

With the school year quickly approaching, educators have been working diligently, creating school re-entry plans. This pandemic is a novel phenomenon; planning upcoming schooling conditions has had to be fluid, keeping up with the growing body of knowledge around the effects of COVID-19. In preparing for the upcoming school year, it is the perfect opportunity for educators to uphold equitable and proactive approaches in anticipation of the various virtual schooling realities.

Why It Matters
Leveraging Educational Community Assets

The educational community has been thrust into distance/online learning during intersecting pandemics of COVID-19 and racial violence; all students and educational stakeholders who were accustomed to brick-and-mortar learning spaces were forced into a paradigmatic shift of teaching and learning, all while having to cope with and persevere through experiencing collective trauma. Educators had to quickly learn how to "(a) transfer knowledge without face-to-face contact, (b) design and develop course content in a technology-based environment and (c) deliver content in a way that will both engage the remote student and assure that the content is actually learned" (Larson & Archambault, 2015, p. 169). Conversely, students had to adjust to this form of learning (e.g. not physically being with their teacher and classmates, increased screen time, etc.). As districts prepare to recover, reenter, and reimagine schooling in the age of COVID-19, it is important for the educational community to: attend to the implications surrounding the importance of centering the cultural realities and assets of minoritized communities; and consider how educators can leverage the expertise of parents/caregivers and families in their school communities to participate in healing and systemic planning.

Culturally Responsive Online Learning

K-12 online/distance learning options are not new; various versions of online schooling already exist across the country. Although ensuring culturally responsive and sustaining curriculum is critical in all educational environments, it is important to nuance here the circumstances by which many k-12 students are experiencing online/distance learning—and what incorporating cultural relevance looks like in virtual spaces.

Centering the funds of knowledge as assets of minoritized communities translates into not only attending to the chosen curriculum (i.e. ensuring that the curriculum is reflective of a diverse cross-section of backgrounds, ability, and life experiences)—but also attending to the modes of learning. Waitoller and Thorius (2016) suggest a cross-pollination of Culturally Sustaining Pedagogy (Paris, 2012) and Universal Design for Learning (CAST, 2011), capitalizing on the strengths of each towards creating a responsive environment to "address educational inequities at the intersections of ability, race, language, gender, and class differences, particularly in inclusive education" (p. 367). This idea may be extended to online/distance learning such that content and online modes of learning (e.g. email, lecture, group projects, peer dialogue, modules, independent learning, etc.) can respond to the ways students learn, work, and communicate in online spaces. That is, do the lessons maximize accessibility and flexibility of learning for all students, while considering the abrupt technological switch students have had to make (McLoughlin, 1999)? Educators must engage methods that honor students' unique perspectives and lived experiences, while recognizing how students are responding to online learning, through introducing a variety of online instructional options. In this way educators are stimulating learning multidimensionally.

Leveraging the Expertise of Parents/Caregivers and Families

Students' homes are the new physical classroom. Parents/caregivers and other family members have the best insight into how students are faring in the new online/distance learning environment. Ideally, schools would have already established relationships with parents/caregivers, fostering open lines of communication, and integrating family voice into educational operations. The online/distance learning space should be no different; in fact collaboration, and the willingness to "actively listen to learn, making efforts to understand these experiences [of parents/caregivers and families]," are critical to ensuring that the online classroom environment is culturally sustaining (Huskins et al., 2020; Jackson et al., 2020; Lazzell et al., 2020). Additionally, partnering with parents/caregivers in conversations about systemic planning for the upcoming school year ensures that education leaders are respecting the voices of families, and considering the impact of policies and practices on both home and schooling (Morton, 2017). This is especially important when considering families of Color, and families living in disinvested communities, are often positioned as deficient; as an education community, we must disrupt "negative and deficit perceptions coupled with low expectations" which "ignore the strengths and assets of parents/caregivers and the impact they have on the learning of their children" (Morton, 2017, p. 3).

In all cases, it is important to remember to build grace into the process, as it is new co-terrain for everyone. With grace, comes sympathy and empathy—and while this may be a natural progression

in human emotion—it is important to be intentional in altering these perceptions in ways that invites students into conversations, creating space for them to address and name their own realities, legitimizing minoritized students' intersectional socio-political identities (Jackson et al., 2018). In this way, educators can hone their skills of integrating student voice into the lessons, while practicing asset-based approaches to teaching. This shifts away from the deficit ways in which minoritized students, in particular, have been characterized as lacking resources during this pandemic—toward cultivating a humanizing learning space that values our students. In conjunction with promoting the creation of a caring classroom community in which students are empowered to be actors in their own learning, asset-based approaches to online/distance learning, particularly in this time of COVID-19, reminds students that adverse situations can strengthen their agency and innovation.

For Equity Now
Considerations for Online/Distance Learning

Throughout this newsletter, we have emphasized the importance of leaning into the assets that exist in minoritized families, to maximize the online/distance learning experience. In doing this, we foster an authentically inclusive online learning environment which respects and uplifts students and families who have been historically marginalized in conversations of worth and value. Wrapping up this piece, we offer a couple of considerations to keep in mind in the pursuit of equitable online spaces in the age of COVID-19:

Cultivate a Caring Online Classroom Community

Co-creating a caring online classroom community involves an intentional cultivation of a virtual space that is inclusive, supportive, and sustaining (Huskins et al., 2020; Lazzell et al., 2020). This involves attention to students' individual and collective needs, cultivating a healthy space for open dialogue for students. In particular, "Online learning presents an opportunity for educators to co-construct "virtual classroom" culture with students by cogenerating the rules of "netiquette," and other norms for online interactions that can personalize the online experience, and connect students with one another" (Huskins et al., 2020, p. 4; Lazzell et al. 2020). A caring online classroom community can be foundational for activating minoritized students' funds of knowledge, signaling that their realities are also part of the generation of knowledge.

Maintain Perspective: We are Persevering through a Crisis

We must keep at the forefront of our minds that we are not simply engaging in online/distance learning; we are engaging in online/distance learning *while in crisis*. It is important to incorporate elements of social emotional learning into the schooling time. There are various swirling thoughts, ideas, and emotions associated with the intersection of home, schooling, and COVID-19 that may have a direct effect on students' performance, cognitive presence, and overall conceptualization of the current state of the world. This is where grace comes in. Having structured time to attend to the class' state of being may be beneficial in ensuring that all students feel heard and seen—even in virtual spaces.

Meet the Authors

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