

INEQUITIES IN ONLINE CLASSROOMS: HOW DO WE BRIDGE THE DISTANCE (LEARNING)?



Welcome to Equity Digest! This newsletter is for education stakeholders (e.g. community members, caregivers) who have an interest in supporting educational equity in their school communities. What is educational equity? Educational equity can be defined as beliefs, actions, and policies that enable all students to have access to and participate in quality learning environments and experience successful outcomes. Each Equity Digest explains the concepts and findings of the latest academic research surrounding a particular equity-focused topic. The intent of this periodical is to relay equity concepts and supporting research, “digesting” key findings so you can draw informed conclusions. The Digest also offers ways that you can advance equitable practices in your school community. Enjoy!

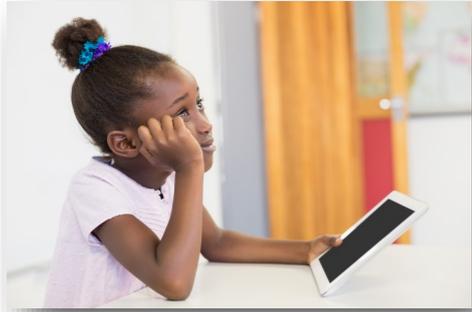
This edition of *Equity Digest* is a call to action for school community stakeholders to work alongside minoritized students and families (people with identities such as LGBTQ+, non-binary, women, disabled, non-Christian, people of Color, and/or emergent multilingual individuals) as they experience compounding inequities during this historic period of the COVID-19 pandemic. Here, we discuss inequities related to online/distance learning, and how schools and school communities can serve as resources and supports for minoritized students.

Get Informed

Educational Inequities are Compounded and Exacerbated by the COVID-19 Pandemic

Beyond the increased and exacerbated needs during the time of COVID-19 (i.e., [food access](#), social service supports, etc.), many minoritized students have faced specific inequities, as numerous school systems have worked diligently to transition to online/distance learning. Some inequities minoritized students may experience include limited access to digital devices and [WIFI](#), as well as parents’ and caregivers’ job loss, and housing insecurity due to job loss. These issues are [compounded](#) by [health disparities](#) in relation to

the virus (Kearney & Muñana, 2020; Waterfield, 2020). Finally, amid all of this, we have seen unrelenting examples of state-sponsored violence and oppression that disproportionately affect minoritized people, particularly Black, Indigenous and communities of Color



(Jackson et al., 2020). The intersections of the COVID-19 pandemic, with amplified health, economic, and safety inequities experienced by minoritized

communities, has been referred to as “a pandemic within a pandemic” (Weil Cornell Medicine, 2020). These compounded issues provide an opportunity to foster authentic dialogue in the virtual classroom, practicing anti-racist teaching and genuine integration of minoritized students’ assets, ideas, and lived experiences.

It is Important to Recognize the Assets of Historically Marginalized Communities

Minoritized students have a wealth of cultural and knowledge-based assets, despite it not being as heavily reflected in schools and curriculum (Jackson et al., 2020; Moll et al., 1992). It’s time to re-frame the **deficit narrative**—in this case, a narrative that blames students and families for negative educational outcomes—and instead, hold educators and schools accountable for these issues. Now more than ever in this digital age, it is important to work side-by-side with minoritized students and families, advocating for **culturally responsive and sustaining** policies and practices in classrooms and schools that value and draw from cultural assets (Coomer, et al., 2018; Jackson, et al., 2015; Jackson et al., 2020; Moore, et al., 2015; Paris, 2012).

Why You Should Care

An Asset-Based Narrative is Essential to the Pursuit of Educational Equity

Inequities Surfaced through Distance Learning

Teachers have had to adjust their teaching styles due to online/distance learning, including how they plan out curriculum, and delivering content in an engaging way that facilitates remote learning (Larson & Archambault, 2015). On the other side of the screen, students have had to quickly adapt and adjust to learning in a virtual space, in addition to losing in-person social contact with friends. As districts have progressed into the reentry (and reimagination) period of teaching in remote learning contexts, equity must be centered in all educational spaces. Centering equity in distance learning includes honoring the cultural assets of historically marginalized communities, listening to students and families about challenges they face, and leveraging the knowledge and skills of minoritized parents/caregivers in order to support and facilitate online learning (Jackson et al., 2020).

What a Culturally Responsive and Sustaining Online Educational Environment Looks Like

Online/distance learning is not new, and many educators and school community stakeholders recognize that **culturally responsive and sustaining policies and practices** (Paris, 2012) are essential to support the learning and engagement of minoritized students; however, not everyone is aware of what culturally responsive education looks like in virtual settings (Jackson et al., 2020; Paris, 2012).

The term *funds of knowledge* refers to tapping into the **cultural assets** and knowledge base of minoritized students and families, and applying that knowledge to facilitate teaching and learning (Moll et al., 1992). Utilizing this cultural knowledge is essential to culturally responsive and sustaining online classrooms. An example of using funds of knowledge is ensuring curriculum honors diverse identities and

lived experiences, listening to minoritized students and families about their culture and values, while diversifying teaching modes and methods in order to reflect back what has been said—all while attending to students’ different ways of learning and knowing (Jackson et al., 2020; Moll et al., 1992).

The Importance of Valuing the Cultural Assets of Minoritized Communities

Oftentimes, minoritized students and families are seen and treated as if they are deficient in many ways, that they have no cultural assets that could contribute to positive outcomes for their students (Morton, 2017).

Believing the deficit narrative, educators and education systems often set lower expectations for minoritized students than their white peers (Morton, 2017). An inclusive school



community challenges this narrative, recognizes the assets of minoritized communities, students, and parents/caregivers, and sets high expectations for these students. In this kind of school community, minoritized students are set up for success—during the pandemic and after.

The Cross-Pollinated, Inclusive Virtual Classroom

One method to create a truly inclusive and culturally responsive and sustaining educational environment is by combining Culturally Responsive Pedagogy (Paris, 2012) and Universal Design for Learning (CAST, 2011)—an idea pioneered by Waitoller and Thorius (2016). The “cross-pollination” of these two pedagogies creates an environment that recognizes and combats educational inequities at the intersections of ability, race, language, gender, and class (Waitoller & Thorius, 2016). This cross-pollination method can be applied to online learning in teaching and communicating via a variety of virtual modalities, in order to engage all students and facilitate online learning.

To address educational inequities using the cross-pollination method, school community stakeholders and educators must ask themselves: Does this online lesson facilitate learning for all students? Does this virtual classroom and online learning honor the cultural assets of minoritized communities?

Take another look at the virtual teaching mode and incorporate a variety of these methods into the curriculum, including documents, lectures, group projects, peer dialogue, modules, independent learning, and more (Jackson et al., 2020; McLoughlin, 1999). Consider the identities of minoritized students—does the curriculum include and value diverse identities and draw from students' cultures to create a unique inclusive virtual classroom? Do minoritized students see themselves in a positive light in the curriculum? This is culturally responsive, multidimensional learning (Jackson et al., 2020), where all students have the opportunity to succeed.

Moving Forward

Ensuring Equity in Online/Distance Learning

Throughout this *Equity Digest*, we've explored the challenges of minoritized students and communities during the COVID-19 pandemic, and some essential components of centering equity in online/distance learning. Here, we offer some considerations on how to go about creating a virtual space where all students have the opportunity to succeed.

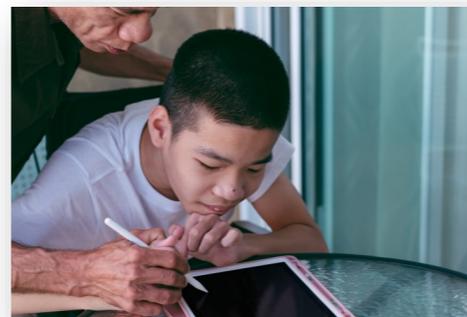
Create a Truly Inclusive Virtual Classroom/School Community

Whether in-person or online, school community stakeholders can advocate for caring classrooms and affirming school communities that engage minoritized students such that they experience an educational environment that is supportive and inclusive of diverse identities (Lazzell et al., 2020). Educators and school community stakeholders can work with students to co-

create a liberatory, virtual school community where students are encouraged to share their ideas, cultural assets are valued, and student voice is honored (Huskins et al., 2020; Lazzell et al., 2020).

Learning During a Crisis

Students are not just learning online—they are learning during a crisis in human history. School community stakeholders must advocate for social emotional support for students during this critical time and beyond. This support includes valuing social emotional learning and student emotional wellbeing (Jackson et al., 2020). Caring and affirming virtual school communities and classrooms can provide space for students to vent their fears, anxieties, and general concerns during the pandemic and beyond (Huskins et al., 2020; Lazzell et al., 2000). During this pandemic, school community stakeholders who advocate for social justice must work to ensure that minoritized students are supported. Your role in all of this is to advocate for an inclusive and affirming virtual school community that supports the high-quality education and wellbeing of minoritized students. While the world may seem out of control right now, it is within your power to advocate for educational equity.



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Meet the Authors

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About the Midwest & Plains Equity Assistance Center

The mission of the Midwest & Plains Equity Assistance Center is to ensure equity in student access to and participation in high quality, research-based education by expanding states' and school systems' capacity to provide robust, effective opportunities to learn for all students, regardless of and responsive to race, sex, and national origin, and to reduce disparities in educational outcomes among and between groups. The Equity by Design briefs series is intended to provide vital background information and action steps to support educators and other equity advocates as they work to create positive educational environments for all children. For more information, visit <http://www.greatlakesequity.org>.

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Disclaimer

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