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OPPORTUNITY:
Considering Isolation and Equity When Implementing Online Learning

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Abstract: Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, school closures across the United States have forced teachers to implement various forms of contact-less instruction. The research on childhood trauma and learning indicates that social/emotional factors significantly impact the effectiveness of instructional approaches. Therefore, shifts to online learning should consider students' immersion within traumatic circumstances. This unprecedented conversion from face-to-face to distance learning, while unavoidable, reinforces the importance of relationship and community in lesson delivery and learning experiences. By moving too quickly into rigorous and demanding web-based instruction, teachers and administrators risk overwhelming learners who must navigate a world that unexpectedly and dramatically changed over the course of days and weeks. Failure to recognize the potential trauma that affects learners in difficult times can lead to harmful results, even with the best of intentions. As teachers move students online, they must keep in mind that not all students are living through this upheaval within similar circumstances, thus they are experiencing different types of trauma, depending both on zip code inequities and family structure variances. Moreover, this unexpected structure could provide a unique opportunity to improve our educational approaches.

Keywords: research, trauma, isolation, online learning, instruction

- January 20, 2020: First case of coronavirus is identified in the United States

- February 11, 2020: World Health Organization names the virus "COVID-19"

- February 28, 2020: First COVID-19 death is reported for the United States

- March 26, 2020: United States reports 81,321 cases and more than 1,000 deaths

- April 7, 2020: United States reports 398,809 cases and 12,895 deaths

- May 10, 2020: United States reports 1,309,541 cases and 78,794 deaths

(Taylor, 2020; Hernandez, O'Key, Watts, Manley, & Pettersson, 2020)

The timeline above exhibits just how quickly the COVID-19 pandemic is redefining life in the United States. The majority of Americans are under state and/or local stay-at-home orders and are leaving their homes only for essential jobs and necessary errands. Amid this flurry of increasing uncertainty and tragic loss, news of school closures invaded the usual carefree promise of Spring Break weeks. By Friday, March 13, the majority of Texas schools were closed for differing lengths of time, and when this journal went to print, closures had extended until the end of the school year, and how and when to start the new year was still undetermined.

Districts are scrambling to make sense of contact-less learning, exploring Internet-based resources, virtual classroom portals, and videoconferencing-based lessons. Many of us entered into this new living and teaching experience completely blind to how online learning should be framed and delivered to students. Districts with adequate technology resources shifted online easily, and districts without such infrastructure worked with limited electronic options and compiled hard copies of work for parents and guardians to obtain and deliver to students.

Unfortunately, this rush to provide learning opportunities for students subjected to stay-at-home orders often neglected to take into account the social/emotional factors that accompany a sudden shift in learning—and living—situations. Educational leaders need to acknowledge the trauma that students will experience when living through such a massive upheaval in their daily routines. Students across the country were expected to acclimate to a new learning environment as they lost their most significant and consistent daily routine of attending school, learning with their teachers and peers, and the most critical need laid bare by this crisis, eating regular meals. Issues of disparate equity and access in our educational systems bubble and boil to the surface daily. Some students have the support structures in place to adapt to a changing learning environment, but many do not. By moving too quickly into rigorous and demanding web-based instruction, teachers and administrators risk overwhelming learners who are suffering traumas, whether related to the pandemic or not, within the pervasive stress of losing the identities they held in their school settings just mere weeks ago.

Effects of Trauma on Student Learning

Students experience stress and trauma in many parts of their lives, not only in the wake of a worldwide pandemic. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) (2020), the data on Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) outline that not only can family events trigger trauma but "witnessing violence in the community" can also add to the trauma children experience on a daily basis. This is further evidenced by the CDC's research that reminds all caregivers that any kind of trauma can "negatively impact education and job opportunities" (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2020, n.p.), something all learners are struggling with in one way or another. Since all education has been disrupted in most states (Coronavirus and School Closures, 2020) and job opportunities simply do not exist with unemployment skyrocketing in this pandemic (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2020), the trauma effects are only beginning. Notably, the trauma will take different shapes—trauma for five-year-old children will be different than trauma for an eighteen-year-old young adult. The long-term effects of trauma will develop over time, and educators and parents need to watch for the signs.

The pressure that results from stress and trauma affects students' ability to learn and poses a formidable risk to intellectual growth. Terrasi and de Galarce (2017) assert, "The detrimental effects of stress are especially formidable, impeding [students'] physical, social, emotional, and academic development" (p. 36). Under normal circumstances, these understandings enable teachers to nurture their students through difficult circumstances and shepherd them forward in their learning. However, when circumstances force a screen, both literal and figurative, between students and teachers, the social/emotional connection is broken, compounding the trauma and stress. At a time when students are under never-before-experienced stress, they need the support system that schools provide. Removing this support system will have a negative impact not only on students but on their teachers too. Teachers know that stress affects students, and they are acutely aware that "stress hormones . . . have a negative effect on a range of executive functions, weakening children's concentration, language processing, sequencing of information, decision making, and memory" (Terrasi & de Galarce, 2017, pp. 36-37). Without being in front of a group of students daily, watching interactions and noting behaviors, teachers cannot hope to meet the emotional needs of learners.

Similarly, librarians seek to nurture students as they encounter life's obstacles. The school library is, at times, a way for a less connected student to connect. Taylor (2019) posits that librarians consider "trauma-informed approaches" and ask "What happened to this person?" to better understand students' behaviors (Taylor, 2019, p. 29). With school out of session and libraries locked, this daily emotional avenue for students—the library—is not allowed to serve as this significant refuge. Sitler (2009) touts a "pedagogy of awareness" (p. 120) and maintains what teachers and librarians know to be true, "Caring for the human needs of a person is paramount" (p. 122). If teachers cannot care for students, their effectiveness as educators diminishes greatly, and relationships dwindle, creating a void that will take time to heal.

Recent history reveals that teachers expertly employ a pedagogy of awareness in times of trauma and crisis. Consider the position verbalized by the National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) (2001) in their "Resolution on Teaching in Times of Crisis." While this resource was crafted in a different time, a little over two months after the terrorist attacks of 9/11, its statements still hold true today. Traumatic circumstances for both teachers and students continue to present challenges within and outside of learning environments. Understandably, the acute trauma of the COVID-19 pandemic's effects demands much attention, but teachers know that many desperate situations lurk beneath the surface of our immediate focal point of the virus. The words of the NCTE resolution were prescient: "From widespread economic ramifications to the disturbing sense that reality has shifted, everyone has been affected" (para. 4). Upheavals, whether societal, personal, or academic, happen repeatedly, each day, in a constant flood of emerging traumas. What traumas are just below the surface? Which ones will reemerge one year down the line? Two years? Ten years?

Effects of Isolation on Student Learning

Although teachers are powerless to protect their students from traumatic events, they are often able to mitigate the impact of these conditions by cultivating a compassionate, consistent atmosphere in the classroom. Minahan (2019) recognizes the power of teachers "to build a supportive and sensitive environment where students feel safe, comfortable, take risks, learn, and even heal" (p. 35). Unfortunately, the current school closures are splintering those carefully constructed environments and are isolating students and teachers from one another. Separating students from their teachers erases those important relational and emotional checkpoints, obfuscating effective and considerate instruction.

For instance, the separation of teachers from their students negatively impacts opportunities for authentic assessment. Generally speaking, much of communication is nonverbal, and the same could be said for classroom-based formative assessment—one of the most useful tools in a teacher's toolkit. Teachers read the subtle sighs and hunched shoulders of their students and gently step in with support; this cannot happen when they are isolated from one another. Every teacher knows the value of "interpersonal interactions" and that they "are key to successful learning in any environment" (Xu & Xu, 2019, p. 28). No longer are they able to turn and talk with an elbow partner to solidify thinking, offer a thumbs-up gesture as confirmation of understanding, or listen as the teacher answers a student's question by answering someone else's.

Schools are bustling hubs of energy that feed into and power the people within their buildings—teachers, administrators, students, custodians, librarians. That energy is impossible to summon in isolation, and students must confront the "alone together paradox," as our new digital connections "can challenge our human practices of deliberateness, attentiveness, and living fully in the moment" (Cox, 2018, p. 72). While online learning presents several potential pitfalls, Rehn, Maor, and McConney (2017) specifically identify the drawbacks of teaching via videoconferencing: "(1) insufficient time, (2) feelings of isolation, (3) scheduling and logistics, (4) unreliable technology, and (5) limited personal connection" (p. 805). Not only must teachers consider students' experiences, but teachers feel the effects of isolation as well. The relationships between staff members are crucial and they "need time and space to talk with their colleagues about manifestations of trauma and mechanisms for helping students" (Sitler, 2009, p. 122). Finding success in isolation is a difficult proposition, and it is important to remember that the same restrictions separating students from their teachers also separate teachers from one another.

Limits of Moving Learning Online

As educators move students toward online learning, they must consider that most of the pupils are completely unprepared to face this challenge on their own. In fact, many of the structures that exist within schools condition learners to rely on their teachers for direction and inhibit the skills students will need as they explore this new learning mode. Students face the challenges of this new "requirement of higher-level self-directed learning skills and greater difficulties in enabling effective human interactions" (Xu & Xu, 2019, p. 26). In this COVID-19 landscape, K-12 students are struggling to find support to address these two challenges. Teachers are struggling, too, as they work to devise a plan of support for both, but any plan is limited by the need for serious human interaction—an elusive commodity in the context of stay-at-home requirements. Many teachers have opted to use videoconferencing, but Rehn,

Meor, and McConney (2017) remind practitioners, "When video conferencing is used solely to deliver lectures, it is not effective for creating successful learning communities" (p. 803). Moreover, districts are beginning to question the use of videoconferencing due to various security concerns, prompting some districts to ban the use of Zoom™ and other similar platforms.

This forced transition from in-person instruction to online instruction is fraught with limitations. Not only are teachers not present physically to ask questions, to challenge thinking, and to interact in meaningful ways, they are aware that calling this process "online instruction" is a misnomer. Typical online instruction is characterized by an ordered format, willing participants, and known and measurable outcomes. What the pandemic has brought on is something Juliani (2020) calls "emergency remote learning" (para. 4). If that is truly the case—and many would agree that it is—then how are teachers addressing the limits of learning online in emergency and emergent times? Students and teachers alike face "individual differences in technology literacy and unequal access to computers and internet . . . hinder[ing] some students' online learning effectiveness" (Xu & Xu, 2019, p. 26). There are students from California to New Jersey and from Texas to North Dakota who do not have Internet access, some of whom do not have basic utilities. While learning online seems like a perfect solution for school closures, it presents a third-world problem for institutions that are part of a first-world tier. An abrupt shift to online learning means that students and teachers who experience disparities in both access and equity must be supported more fully.

In the best of times, "Online structured courses . . . in typical higher education settings afford adults opportunities to learn in a multitude of ways" (Cox, 2018, p. 73). While Cox is referring to adult, higher education learning—where online instruction thrives when voluntary—the best that can be said of emergency remote learning is that students are being offered scant approaches to instruction with little opportunities to turn surface learning into something that helps them develop as lifelong learners.

A valued component of all instruction, especially literacy instruction, is the face-to-face interaction among stakeholders. Online instruction limits students' peer interactions, and they are detached from the connection with their teacher that is crucial to supporting their capacity as learners. In the much-needed area of social/emotional learning, this isolating structure limits teachers in their efforts to support students through trauma. As Frieze (2015) describes, "After being exposed to a traumatic event, children struggle with motivation, concentration, focus, and personal connections, all of which are essential in promoting reading achievement" (p. 29). Equally missed are reading and writing conferences; no longer will teachers have one-on-one opportunities for instruction. How can teachers ask readers to tackle challenging texts and writers to take risks with their pieces when they no longer see a trusted structure in place to catch them if they fall?

Unique Opportunity to Re-Envision Learning

The traumatic isolation, a clear effect of the COVID-19 pandemic situation, presents a unique opportunity to shift the paradigm in education from the draconian post-war assembly line intended to produce workers for jobs to new-millennium, technology-equipped thinkers who may have several careers in their lifetimes. Consider the clauses of the "Resolution on Teaching in Times of Crisis" (NCTE, 2001), which describe effective literacy practices in harsh situations:

literature and writing instruction as a means for understanding loss, anger, war, and difference; language study as a vehicle for understanding conflict, propaganda, and democratic discourse; and critical literacy as an instrument essential to an informed citizenship and global understanding. (para. 8)

Instead of requiring prescribed daily schedules, schools and teachers should be handing out books by the bushel. While there are still stay-at-home orders for many, groups of fewer than five people can gather to read books together. Even teachers are doing this in school parking lots to discuss curriculum, to socialize, to keep connecting with one another. Teachers are seeing Zoom and Skype™ meetings should become book clubs. The virtual universe offers educators access to libraries and learning on all continents. Teachers should not be sending students home to practice their compliance with online activities. Instead, they should be freeing students and themselves to explore their learning through reading and writing about themselves and their world.

The priority for educators and students should be that they document the emotions and thoughts that run through their minds during this season of human existence. Teachers can push past traditional curriculum to use not only the outside world to engage students but to encourage students to focus inward to find truth, to look for answers, to use this time to reflect and to make sense of what has happened. Teachers can encourage students through the study of literature and through writing opportunities to examine what will happen in their worlds as a result of self-isolation, of quarantine, of scarcity of resources. More importantly, teachers can empower students to reflect on and talk about how each of these elements is affecting them.

Teachers are working diligently each day from their dining rooms, kitchens, and offices. Their efforts are driven by their dedication to serving their kids. But as this new platform unfolds, the autonomy that teachers had as the schools abruptly closed is being replaced by district requirements and structures. While these aim to level the playing field, teachers were asked to put together a plan in a matter of days, and these professionals stepped up and created engaging learning paths for their students. A marriage of the two going forward will serve students better than a one-size-fits-all platform. Teachers, parents, and administrators have this unique opportunity to help students not only get through the trauma but to show students how to navigate the online learning with meaningful assignments and interactions. However, beyond the assignments and activities and projects, students' safety and well-being comes first. Every level of education is immersed in a strangely forced pause; let us not squander that gift.

High-functioning schools and classrooms exist within a reflective cycle that constantly assesses learning and promotes changes that increase effectiveness. This new learning requires that teachers continue to be reflective of our practices and adjust to the needs of the students. As educators at all levels work through this unprecedented situation wherein so many feel lost and wayward, they strive to prioritize the practices that yield the highest growth and produce the least amount of stress and trauma. Instead of replacing our bureaucracies with virtual versions of those same antiquated and unwieldy systems, educators should ensure that this generation of students be set free to explore their understanding of the world on their own terms and through their own lenses. Intentional reflection was important before the current crisis, but it may be even more important now. While it is impossible not to lament the time that we lost this year, we must think towards the future and consider how our practices should evolve so that we find some kind of success moving forward.

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