

Equitable Environments During Distance Learning: A Multi-Lens Perspective

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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

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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”

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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

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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/>

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<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)