

COVID-19 and Informal Education: Considerations for Informal Learning During the Pandemic

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Abstract

The coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic has impacted non-formal education, which includes children's informal learning and social development. Due to the required closings of many informal learning spaces, children have been left without methods to construct their learning physically and socially. This essay discusses how informal learning benefits children, how COVID-19 has interrupted children's receipt of those advantages, and ways in which children, families, educators, and communities can compensate for the temporary closings of informal learning spaces.

Keywords: COVID-19, development, formal learning, informal learning, learning, non-formal learning, social

The coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic has overwhelmingly impacted international activities, particularly in education. Across the globe, schools were forced to close and prematurely end the school year, standardized testing was abandoned without concrete outcomes, and teachers, children, and families were left to find methods to transition, manage continuing education and the stress of COVID-19 not just in their immediate families, but in their communities, including worsening mental illness and wellbeing, child hunger, and increasing the learning gap in

children from low socioeconomic backgrounds (Lee, 2020; Van Lancker & Parolin, 2020). However, COVID-19's impact on non-formal education has been just as significant as its impact on formal learning. Non-formal education serves the community in countless capacities, such as uniting communities and offering social outlets that reinforces traditional learning concepts through fun and engaging nontraditional learning models. These practices often provide new and challenging ways for children to learn, for families to engage with and take part in their children's learning, and informs and influences teacher practices (Kyndtet al., 2016; Song et al., 2017). During a time of extensive quarantine and social distancing, institutions that promote non-formal learning are significantly impacted by their inability to operate fully, and their absence is felt by children, families, and educators in the communities they serve.

Non-formal education, also referred to as informal learning, occurs outside of school settings and allows individuals to construct knowledge through their experiences, skills, and choices (Marsick & Volpe, 1999). Organizations that support informal learning, such as libraries and children's museums, are referred to as informal learning spaces. They provide educational resources that are often not found in traditional education spaces or provide more extensive resources than schools are able to offer. For example, libraries provide wide-ranging literary resources that exceed what schools can provide. Children's museums deliver the physical space and resources to socially engage children in alternative learning experiences by using academic and developmental skills to learn through and about their environment in ways that cannot be replicated in a classroom. Non-formal education serves as a means of support to formal learning, as well as an opportunity for students and other individuals to expand their knowledge and increase their developmental skills.

Under normal circumstances, non-formal education is available during times when formal education is not, usually through extended daytime and weekend hours. However, COVID-19 has affected this, closing all buildings and public spaces that are considered nonessential for an unspecified period, which includes informal learning spaces. This has significantly impacted children and families who previously relied on social interactions to help navigate their learning and development, as they are now confined to their homes with minimal to no social interaction, which can negatively impact children (Kong, 2020). Even as some nonessential businesses begin to reopen, they are operating at reduced

capacities, meaning they are required to function under personal protective equipment and maximum occupancy restrictions not previously applicable. This has not only impacted the community outreach of informal learning, but each community's access to informal learning spaces. During this time, non-formal education has been unable to provide the social and educational outlets that communities need, especially at critical junctions where communities are transitioning out of quarantine, but still need to maintain a certain level of social distancing (Kong, 2020). Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, children were already at risk of encountering issues that are detrimental to their well-being that are associated with a sedentary lifestyle. In comparison between the regular school year and summer break, it has been shown that the structure provided during the school year that includes physical, social, and cognitive engagement helps moderate child obesity and sleep patterns, whereas children are more likely to experience weight gain and negative changes in sleep patterns during the summer when they are less active (Brazendale et al., 2017). These same concerns are applicable to a time of pandemic.

As many states across the country enter some phase of reopening, and some states pause reopening or even consider closing again due to increases in COVID-19 cases, non-formal education is in a state of conflict. While some informal learning spaces have reopened at reduced capacities, others are open only to staff, all while weighing the consequences to public safety. As long as there is no cure or vaccine for COVID-19, the possibility remains for the virus to spread as society reopens. Informal learning spaces now face the dilemma of safe accessibility and service to their communities (Kahn, 2020).

Although informal learning spaces currently face a level of uncertainty for the foreseeable future, informal learning itself is not entirely lost. This is the time to advocate for all forms of informal learning, specifically online learning, for the educational community to help all those affected to maintain a source of learning. Through this pandemic, online or virtual learning has been brought to the forefront and has been a valuable resource in non-formal education. While the physical benefits of informal learning have been halted and are slowly returning to operational status, the focus should remain on creating virtual outlets to maintain a source of learning for students. Considerations for addressing this issue is the use of virtual formats, such as computer-generated museum exhibitions and cyber-schooling, which provide opportunities for

students to actively and safely construct their knowledge while also nurturing their social development by virtually interacting with their peers (Cohen, 2020; Kahn, 2020). Such alternatives serve great purpose in children's social development during a time of quarantine and social distancing.

First, virtual learning alternatives maintain a sense of community (Nikiforos et al., 2020). During a time of pandemic where many people are left to practice isolation, threats to mental health, such as depression, anxiety, stress, and nostalgia can increase due to not being able to partake in what was once considered the normal practices of social engagement (Salari et al., 2020; Wang, et al., 2020). Fullana et al. (2020) reported sixty-five percent of their study participants as having reported symptoms of depression and anxiety and showing a need for coping behaviors. It is important to have virtual learning opportunities to give students a continuum of learning and sharing with others.

Second, virtual learning formats serve as both learning and coping strategies that provide students with the opportunity to interact with their peers while using learning concepts they have already gained to learn and master other learning concepts. This was shown to be effective in Indonesia through the development of My Buddy School System, which is a virtual learning community that addresses the needs of living in rural and urban areas through peer learning (Hidayat et al., 2020). This program was created for peers to share and learn life skills with one another while developing a sense of empathy for one another through virtual interactions. Although this system was tested on just twenty-two junior high students, it was shown to be effective and can be used in the future with improvements.

Lastly, virtual alternatives can be used to promote physical fitness and quality time between children and families. There is a program called Virtual Reality Exergaming (VR), which is a virtual program designed to promote physical fitness among adolescents (McMichael, et al., 2020). Designed with an interventional approach, VR enlists parental involvement to promote the use of virtual exercise games and use them to assess parents' perspectives on gaming and connect children and families through exercise. While these considerations cannot take the place of in-person engagements with peers and the environment, they can serve as a way to fill in the gap during this unprecedented time.

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