IDRA NEWSLETTER

Focus: Student Engagement

Mental Health Implications of Virtual Learning on Student Engagement

by Christina Muñoz

Two out of five young adults 18- to 24-years-old report having at least one "adverse mental or behavioral health condition" during the COVID-19 pandemic, according to survey findings by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Young adults of color experience disproportionately worse mental health outcomes. (Czeisler, et al., 2020)

If you put faces and voices to the numbers, each will echo similar sentiments in their experiences with virtual, remote and distance-learning during the pandemic. Among high school students, stress is a loud theme that reverberates in dialogues about the many challenges students faced this past year.

With the abrupt mass transition to an online distance-learning model in schools, students' home and school environments merged; residual stress from the school day knows no boundaries. They face at-home stressors, like the care and support of younger siblings engaging in their own learning, Internet connectivity issues, learning distractions, restricted privacy for completing classwork, inadequate space to study, and work obligations to help support their families during this period. These apply pressure from yet another angle to students' normal school-related stressors and healthcare concerns heightened by the pandemic.

Preliminary findings from a ground-breaking participatory action-based research conducted by San Antonio students show that more than 71% of survey respondents consider virtual remote learning as contributing more stress than traditional in-person school. Through an IDRA project funded by Seek Common Ground, a team of teens surveyed high school upperclassmen and university undergraduate lowerclassmen finding that 75% of respondents report having struggled with mental health issues during the pandemic. (See Page 2.)

Many students report experiencing a back-and-forth battle between "I'm doing too much, and I'm not doing enough" while engaging in their large amount of online classwork, during and after the school day, as they manage their interaction across several online programs and sites. That emotional stress manifests into physical strain, such as anxiety-induced headaches, stomachaches and back pain.

Virtual remote learning for most students has also meant a disruption to their social lives with friends and peers in the school setting. Little to no socialization with friends and peers during the school day has increased feelings of isolation for students. It has the added layer of limited social interaction due to the fear of contracting the COVID-19 virus and has drastically increased depression rates among young adults.

A national survey by America's Promise Alliance conducted in spring 2020 found almost one third

> *"There is often no separation from my school life and my home life. I'm always mentally thinking about the next assignment I have due, and it keeps me up at night and increases my anxiety."*
>
> *— student survey respondent*

Student Researchers Collect Insights from Peers about the Pandemic's Effects on Schooling

By Ana Ramón

During the summer and fall of 2020, four high school and college students led an IDRA research project to collect insights from their peers about the impact of COVID-19 on students and how the pandemic has worsened or changed the challenges young people face in their schools. The project focused on elevating the voices of the most impacted – families and students – in school reopening planning and policymaking.

The project stemmed from IDRA's new partnership with Seek Common Ground, which launched its COVID-19 Recovery Action Accelerator in 2020 to support state and community-based organizations pursuing equitable and sustainable education policies and experiences.

IDRA announced in September the student team: Jacqueline Campos, Monica Cruz, Alejo Peña Soto and Fatimah Rasul. IDRA trained and supported these student advocates as they developed, distributed and analyzed surveys about the needs of families and students during the COVID-19 pandemic.

The student research team decided to focus on four main categories in their survey questions: education equity, home stressors, at-home learning and discipline in school. The team chose these categories to reflect the current state of education and the existing equity barriers students experience in their own schools. They collected 120 surveys from students in 11th grade through college freshmen in 28 zip codes in the San Antonio area. Key findings of the research include:

- Three out of four students reported struggling with mental wellness issues.
- Students carried additional burdens including poor Internet connectivity, social isolation, and insufficient opportunities to take mental and physical breaks from classes, due to virtual learning.
- Students face pressure to maintain their education while also managing responsibilities like assisting their families, holding jobs and dealing with healthcare needs outside of the classroom.

The researcher team included questions regarding school before COVID-19. Students reported that misguided school discipline, like dress code violations, in-school suspension, and out of school suspension policies, are harmful and cause disruptions to their learning.

As the COVID-19 pandemic contributes to increased structural and learning divisions within the education system, the voices of students affected by the crisis must be central in all decision-making processes. The survey results described in this report clearly show that COVID-19 has created new challenges and exacerbated existing issues in students' schools. IDRA will release the full study soon with a set of recommendations for the state, school districts and schools.

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Student Research Team

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Students of Color Deserve Culturally Responsive Instruction and Ethnic Studies

by Altheria Caldera, Ph.D., and Nino Rodríguez, Ph.D.

The Problem: Cultural Incongruence

Traditional schooling, with norms and standards rooted in whiteness, often is not responsive to the cultures of today's diverse student population (Huber, et al., 2006). This results in a cultural misalignment that forces many students of color into the margins of the school community.

Oftentimes, to succeed in school, marginalized students must embrace – or at least appear to embrace – "whiteness as property" (Donnor, 2013). In other words, they must accept and enact white culture as superior and Western European knowledge as factual. Those who resist are forced to endure an education that "murders" the spirits of marginalized youth or at least hinders their academic performance (Love, 2019).

A Solution: Culturally Responsive Pedagogy

Culturally responsive pedagogy counters this forced assimilation to whiteness and aims to redress the mismatch between students of color and the policies and practices that privilege the identity of students in the dominant culture (Gay & Banks, 2000; Brown-Jeffy & Cooper, 2011).

Cultural identity can be defined as socially constructed categories that teach humans ways of being and behaving. Culturally responsive pedagogy is undergirded by a belief that cultural identity impacts student learning and plays a role in shaping student behavior, values, prior knowledge, interests, and preferences for collaborative or independent work (Bradford, et al., 2000).

Although researchers have long substantiated the need for an education system that is responsive to students' cultural identities, many schools still have not adopted culturally responsive educational practices that value the identities of all students. At a basic level, culturally responsive instruction acknowledges and affirms students' cultures in schools (Johnson, 2016). It integrates students' cultural identities into the main curriculum.

Students of color need to be taught by culturally responsive educators who are knowledgeable about "the cultural particularities of specific ethnic groups" in order to "make schooling more interesting and stimulating for... ethnically diverse students" (Gay, 2002).

Although culturally responsive pedagogy alone will not resolve some of the longstanding equity issues that negatively affect the educational outcomes for students of color, it can improve student learning and self-efficacy when operationalized effectively.

Importance of Ethnic Studies for Educators and Students

In order to effectively enact culturally responsive pedagogy, educators need extensive training (Johnson, 2017). Culturally responsive training: (a) provides educators with a significant understanding of their students' cultures and the contributions that each ethnic group has made to our country; (b) equips educators with the knowledge, skills and abilities necessary to abandon cultural deficit ideologies that are brought on by biases and prejudices rooted in ignorance; and (c) positions educators to design a multicultural curriculum that includes, rather than excludes, students of color.

Not surprisingly, evidence shows that ethnic studies coursework has a positive impact on the academic engagement and performance of students of color (Donald, 2016). It also enhances the school experiences of students enrolled in both K-12 and post-secondary institutions. A number of studies show the positive impact of ethnic studies courses and culturally relevant pedagogy. An Arizona report, for example, found higher standardized test passing rates and high school graduation, and a Stanford Graduate

> *Culturally responsive instruction acknowledges and affirms students' cultures in schools and it integrates students' cultural identities into the main curriculum.*

School of Education study found a 21 percentage point increase in attendance and a 1.4 grade point average increase (Craven, 2019).

Furthermore, ethnic studies courses do more than enhance the academic performance of students of color; they augment the educational experience of all students who are exposed to it (Anderson, 2016).

When coupled with culturally responsive pedagogy and taught by culturally responsive educators, ethnic studies positions both educators and students to:

- address controversial issues associated with power and privilege (e.g., racism);

- focus on the accomplishments of a wide array of people of color instead of a few high-profile individuals;

- give proportionate attention to all groups of color;

- contextualize women's issues as they are impacted by race and ethnicity;

- integrate analysis of socioeconomic status (class), particularly poverty; and

- emphasize feelings, attitudes and values – not just factual information.
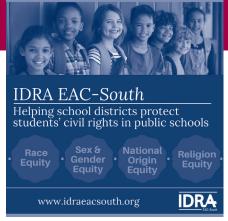
Recommendations

Formal educational institutions (schools) function as does U.S. society in general. Both remain rooted in discriminatory ideals that perpetuate oppressive policies and practices that maintain systemic inequities. For marginalized students, the schooling process – guided by policies, practices and curriculum – prepares them for secondary citizenship while simultaneously elevating their white, straight, middle to upper-class, able-bodied peers to positions of power and authority. Culturally responsive pedagogy alongside ethnic studies is one way schooling might be re-imagined to serve students of color equitably.

IDRA recommends the following:

- States and school districts should adopt policies that require and provide training to schools on culturally responsive pedagogy.

- States should require teachers to have ethnic studies coursework in teacher preparation programs.

- States should require that an ethnic studies course be included in the core curriculum.

- All states should develop state-approved

ethnic studies curricula, including Mexican American Studies, African American Studies, Indigenous Studies (Native American Studies) (Janzer, 2019), Asian American Studies, and Pacific Islander Studies courses.

Culturally responsive instruction that integrates ethnic studies can be a tool for furthering the goals of democracy in a pluralistic society.

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Strategies for Engaging Students in Today's Virtual and Hybrid Classrooms

by Stephanie García, Ph.D.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, education experts, companies and individuals created and shared a plethora of online resources educators and students alike. For good measure, educators and researchers are now evaluating the usefulness of such resources and their impact on student outcomes.

Student engagement has a positive relationship with student outcomes (Aguilar, et al., 2020). It is important then to better understand the learners' experience to improve instruction and maximize student achievement. This is especially true for both the traditional and digital settings during the COVID-19 pandemic.

GoGuardian recently published findings from its qualitative research study on engagement, with an emphasis on the online learning context. Although the report, 2020 *State of Engagement Report*, covers engagement across the spectrum, the brief summary here focuses solely on their findings on student engagement.

According to GoGuardian's study, "Engaging learning experiences are characterized by students carrying the cognitive load, a sense of urgency and opportunities for interactivity" (Aguilar, et al., 2020). This means that students remain engaged when they are being challenged, can connect or relate to what they are learning, and have opportunities to engage with the content and collaborate with others.

Teachers play a crucial role in increasing student engagement, even more so during a pandemic. Below are GoGuardian Team's recommendations to increase student engagement in any instructional setting.

- **Communicate in multiple mediums.** There is always something nice about the predictable and the routines you set in the classroom, but mixing it up also keeps things interesting for students. By using different multi-modal platforms, you model how students can com-municate information differently in their own presentations and projects.

- **Include hands-on learning.** Hands-on learning may be challenging in distance learning environments, but it is not impossible. In fact, students are craving this even more because they need outlets and opportunities to create and explore through hands-on activities and projects.

- **Make it social.** Although challenging during virtual learning, teachers can use strategies to help students socialize and collaborate online in purposeful ways. For example, teachers can add social media discussions or move traditional student engagement activities online, like having students teach each other what they have learned.

- **Gamify learning.** No matter the age of the student, educational games are helpful tools for increasing student engagement in all content areas. Students can create their own games to solidify their understanding of a topic or even teach others a concept.

- **Provide feedback.** A troubling component of online learning contexts is the common use of prescriptive and standardized forms of assessment. Although they are easier to grade, these assessments do not always lend to specific feedback. Remember to give feedback on students' thought processes and allow revisions to their work products because these lead to a more engaging learning experience.

- **Provide assignments to be submitted as blogs, videos or podcasts.** Non-traditional forms of relaying information and teaching concepts help keep students more engaged than they would be in a traditional lecture setting. They are more fun for teachers too!

- **Use live video conferencing.** We have all been using Zoom and similar tools more often, and it is helpful in keeping us connected, but use this approach sparingly. Screen fatigue and the digital divide are real and should be navigated with care. If you do have a "synchronous

> *Students remain engaged when they are being challenged, can connect or relate to what they are learning, and have opportunities to engage with the content and collaborate with others.*

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learning time," be sure to record it and make it available to students who could not attend.

• **Incorporate student engagement activities, like panel discussions, case studies, videos, student presentations, role playing, group activities and more.** All of these are great ideas that promote active learning and require a higher level of thinking.

Regardless of traditional or digital learning settings, the basic needs to keep students engaged in these ways remain the same. According to the GoGuardian study findings, some of these examples include student access to resources, feeling safe, and prior experiences with a subject. If students cannot access their instructional material, then they are not being set up for success.

Often students are viewed as being unmotivated or disengaged, when, in reality, they may not have access to their assignments or are facing connectivity or technology issues. Student engagement also is affected if students do not feel safe in the learning environment or have had negative prior experiences with a subject matter. A safe and positive school climate can affect student "attendance, engagement, learning and even graduation rates" (IDRA, 2020).

IDRA's *Courage to Connect – A Quality Schools Action Framework* calls for schools to build the capacity to create environments and activities that value students of all backgrounds and to incorporate them into the learning process and other social activities within the school, with academic achievement as a result (Robledo Montecel & Goodman, 2010).

District-level factors, such as "public funding, educational resources and operational infrastructure," can all impact engagement too (Aguilar, et al., 2020). In a recent IDRA webinar, "Student Perspectives on a Changing School Climate," students shared the importance for districts and schools to "prioritize resources to support the mental healthcare and well-being of students who are faced with the challenges of distance learning and the added stress of social isolation from peers" (IDRA, 2020). These are all important policies and funding priorities when acting at the school district level to impact student engagement.

Following are considerations for the campus level.

• According to Aguilar, et al. (2020), an engaged school knows "the importance of using multiple measures that examine the whole child in order to provide a more comprehensive understanding of how engaged students are."

• Although student engagement seems difficult to measure, there is evidence to look out for at the classroom level, including "auditory signals, emotional responses and body language" (Aguilar, et al., 2020). Educators know when their students are engaged, connected and challenged appropriately.

• At the classroom-level, factors that impact student engagement include "the design and form of the information being shared, the classroom culture, the instructional practices implemented by a teacher, and the structure and activities of a lesson" (Aguilar, et al., 2020).

More than just appealing to students' interests, educators can increase student engagement by adopting critical, pedagogical approaches that are culturally responsive and sustaining. Also, social-emotional learning is key to student engagement (Aguilar, et al., 2020). If used correctly, all these approaches will also advance diversity and equity for all students. This is especially needed during this time.

Resources

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of high school students reported feelings of unhappiness and depression outside their normal ranges during the first months of the pandemic.

Limited social interaction impacts students' attention and interest in school in general, so the reduced interaction through online learning platforms between students and their peers and teachers has greatly affected students' relationship with their learning (Wentzel & Wigfield, 1998).

Students also struggle to maintain authentic engagement with their peers and instructors during the school day. A Texas Education Agency (TEA) report found that 11% of the state student population (more than 600,000 public school students) were disengaged from their classwork or unresponsive to teacher and school outreach (2020).

While defined by TEA in this case as the completion of assignment and response to teacher and school outreach, *student engagement* usually is more broadly characterized as a student's sense of connection to, safety and involvement in their learning environment that leads to positive outcomes in motivation, academic achievement, regular school attendance and graduation. Engagement is a nuanced construct and is comprised of various facets of the student's experience at school, including academic self-efficacy, motivation and connectedness to or feelings of belonging in their school and classroom environment.

It is important to examine these facets of student engagement deeper through the lens of student mental health and wellness. State leaders, school leaders, advocates and other community leaders need to understand the nuances of the student experience during the pandemic and work to create a safe, nurturing space in which students can equitably receive a quality education, through both traditional and virtual options.

Schools and communities need viable solutions to address student mental health and wellness concerns and their impact on academic engagement. IDRA advocates for legislation that directly addresses student mental health concerns. For example, a proposal in the Texas Senate (Senate

Digital Divide Directly Impacted Student-School Engagement During COVID-19

By Christina Muñoz

Students with limited access to the basic resources necessary to thrive in a digital learning landscape, such as broadband connectivity and/or technological devices, are among those who are at highest risk of missing out on classroom instruction during the pandemic. Students of color are significantly less likely to have access to broadband or Internet-connected devices compared to their white peers (TSTA, 2020).

Student engagement, which is students' intellectual, social and emotional connection to school, is foundational to learning. Reports at the end of spring 2020 showed that almost 89% of students were fully engaged at the time of COVID-19 school closures and the end of the school year.

To examine how the digital divide impacted students' relationship to their learning during the COVID-19 pandemic, IDRA analyzed data on preliminary student engagement patterns from the spring 2019-20 school year and paired it with an analysis of Texas students'

broadband access from the American Community Survey (2019: ACS 5-Year Estimates).

The Texas Education Agency (TEA) began in May 2020 to require schools to report on student engagement in spring coursework for the 2019-20 school year and through the 2020-21 school year. In this case, TEA defined student engagement by the completion of assignments, responsiveness to teacher and school outreach, and logging into virtual classrooms.

TEA reported that more than 600,000 Texas public school students – over one in 10 students – did not complete assignments or respond to teacher outreach in spring 2020 during the pandemic (TEA, 2020). Schools lost touch with Black students and Latino students at over twice the rate of white students (TEA, 2020).

IDRA's analysis shows that student engagement suffered as a direct result of digital divide exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic, particularly with the transition to remote learning. Key findings show:

- Access to broadband of any type was a significant predictor of full student engagement within large suburban and urban school districts.

- School districts with the highest rates of student engagement tend to be urban and suburban areas.

- School districts with the highest rates of students counted as "unengaged" tend to represent greater proportions of Latino students.

- Rural school districts demonstrate disproportionately high rates of schools having either no student contact or having lost student contact.

IDRA will release the full study soon while also urging Texas policymakers to establish a permanent broadband infrastructure that includes connecting high-speed Internet to urban and rural communities and that addresses education needs of the most vulnerable student populations.*

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* See Texas Needs an Equitable State Broadband Plan to Serve Students and Families, by Thomas Marshall (February 2021). References available online.

(Mental Health Implications of Virtual Learning on Student Engagement, continued from Page 6)

Bill 179) responds to the growing need for accessible and effective counseling support in schools, particularly in response to the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on student's mental health and wellness. Another measure (SB 178) would work to incrementally reduce student to counselor ratios in Texas public schools over the course of nine academic school years to reflect one school counselor for every 300 students by the 2029-30 academic school year. The average in Texas is currently one counselor for every 442 students.

Other strategies include teaching students self-care techniques and effective tools in promoting strong, resilient mental and emotional wellness for themselves, their peers and their families.

Additionally, IDRA advocates for training school board leadership, school leaders and teachers in

trauma-informed school care to better equip them to respond to the mental health crisis pervasive among young students.

Conversations surrounding mental health concerns must continue for promoting authentic, transparent and accepting culture around strong student mental health and wellness. Schools should continue to connect students in need of support and guidance with counselors and other mental health professionals to whom they can entrust their challenges and struggles.

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Focus: Student Engagement

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April 1 is IDRA's birthday!

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