

Reports from the Field

What School Leaders Need to Consider About Virtual Engagement at Home During the Pandemic: Learning Loss or Learning Gain? A Commentary

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There is a common assumption in education that lack of face-to-face instruction during COVID-19 will result in a learning loss when students return to physical classrooms. While some studies reported interesting results on learning loss, more research must be done to inform schooling practices. At a recorded webinar, learning loss was examined by analyzing the ideas of school leaders who manifested deficit-based and/or asset-based views in doing virtual instruction at home. The authors wrote this commentary as a critical reflection of the ideas presented by leaders who reimagined learning gain instead of loss as they recognize, value, and honor the many culturally- and socially-situated knowledge and skills students have acquired and learned during these unprecedented times.

Keywords: learning loss, learning gain, deficit-based mindset, asset-based learning, equity

In general, many school leaders and educators are not well-equipped to meet the pedagogical challenges of distance learning and collective emotional trauma caused by social and physical isolation during these unprecedented times brought upon us by the global COVID-19 pandemic. Educational leaders and teachers are constantly pivoting and learning how to deal with the new reality of managing their personal lives and daily routines of working from home, while pursuing their careers and meeting the individual needs of their students. Caring and exceptional teachers attempt to make adaptations and engage students all the time (Lalas & Strikwerda, 2020) in their virtual classrooms to provide them with meaningful instruction, access to academic content, and daily live interactions. School leaders support their teachers by encouraging them to provide creative learning experiences and assume generous responsibility for their students regardless of the many out-of-school factors and daily stressors that are out of their inherent control (Berliner, 2013).

For these educational leaders and teachers who are operating in virtual spaces, there are no excuses for not discovering explicit ways of facilitating access to learning and engagement for all students including the dual language learners and students with special needs. However, during the first quarter of the 2020-2021 school year, data show that attendance in many California schools are below 80% and around 50% of students are receiving D's and F's who are participating in the hybrid model (Blume & Barajas, 2020). Among dual language learners and students with special needs, the numbers are even more dismal reaching up to 100% failure rate on the Facilitated Online Learning programs that are mostly self-instructed in some schools (Blume & Barajas, 2020). There is a growing consensus that the achievement gap between students from high-income families and traditionally marginalized students from low-income families continues to exacerbate during the pandemic (Hollingsworth, 2020).

During this time of COVID-19, homes are transformed into centers of learning and teaching. With or without parental involvement, training across socioeconomic backgrounds and implicit or explicit guidance from educators, parents are taking on the role of guiding, helping, and monitoring their own children's education in implementing distance learning (Erdogan et al., 2019). Consequently, a tension exists between the potential within the concept of learning gain among those students with parents who are able to guide their students' work, and the notion of learning loss because of school closure. The key issue, then, becomes this: how can the concept of equity be truly tapped into as a solution during distance learning? Equity is important because it is a frame of mind that guides what appropriate and relevant remedies can be done to meet the needs of students while doing distance learning at home or in-person instruction.

This commentary addresses the challenges of school leaders and educators during the pandemic and how to employ equity as a solution for learning loss. What are the different ways of describing learning loss, and the equitable practices to address them? How do the different views about learning loss from educators manifest in handling the curriculum and delivery of instruction in distance learning? Are educators and school leaders creating virtual spaces that value the diverse experiences and knowledge of students as assets? Are students provided with equitable and ample opportunities to experience meaningful engagement and demonstrate their learning in virtual or physical spaces? We conducted a webinar conversation with experienced school site administrators and teacher-leaders to address these questions and seek answers or practical solutions to these concerns. We are sharing the results in this commentary.

Learning Loss as a Deficit View

Learning loss is a concern “that students aren’t learning content and mastery skills at the same rate they typically would be” (Pier et al., 2021). As a measure of achievement, it is the “difference between what they would have learned in a normal year and what they learn during the pandemic” (Pier et al., 2021). Quantitatively using Measures of Academic Progress (MAP), research evidence on learning loss produced by CORE-PACE Research Partnership showed significant learning loss in both English Language Arts and Mathematics with students in earlier grades (Pier et al., 2021). Interestingly, according to a recent report from Collaborative for Student Growth titled *Learning through COVID-19* (2020) that includes comparative data from about 4.4 million students in grades 3-8, on average students are learning more than expected during the pandemic. The data compared the results from the (MAP) assessments that were given in the fall 2019 (pre-pandemic) and then again in fall 2020 (during the pandemic) which demonstrated a learning gain in both math and reading across those grade levels (Kuhfeld et al., 2020). Beth Tarasawa, head of the research extorted in a news report that, “most students made some learning gains in both reading and math since COVID started” (Turner, 2020, p.3). This report provides much needed encouragement as it combats the fearful predictions of a massive learning loss during the pandemic, demonstrating that a learning gain in students is plausible even during difficult times.

As educators and school leaders continue to explore the phenomena of learning loss, an equitable lens may be needed to foster transformative solutions in addressing the educational disparity our students are experiencing during distance learning. In this commentary, equity is defined as, “the relevant and responsive educational attempts that are culturally and socially situated to meet the program or instructional needs of students, when they need them, relative to their academic backgrounds and social and cultural identities” (Lalas & Strikwerda, 2020, p. 294). To develop an understanding of learning loss through the lens of equity in distance learning we, the authors of this commentary, posed a series of questions to a panel of educators as an exploratory conversation with the aim to: 1) develop an objectified understanding of the notion of learning loss, 2) examine viewpoints that reflect certain educational theory and practice, and 3) identify some practical solutions to enhance learning acceleration. These experienced educators engaged in our courageous webinar conversation and freely expressed their understanding and manifestations of race, racism, social class, and equity across content areas in distance learning, while employed in their regular jobs as district educators. During the conversation, it was discussed that teachers, classified staff, and administrators must be considered "essential workers" on the ground pulling the education of students together during this difficult time of the pandemic. They viewed the administrators, teachers, and staff as essential workers because they are continually doing what’s best for students out in the real world making a difference in the lives of our youth that attend our K-12 public schools. They all demonstrated their criticality as scholar-practitioners as they candidly and bravely spoke upon their lived experiences as educators dedicated to the academic success of all their students, especially during the pandemic.

Understandably, parents, teachers, and school leaders are concerned that when the pandemic subsides, many students will return to physical schools with significant learning loss, similar to what has been shown to occur during the summer when there is a long period away from school (Soland et al., 2020). They are making assumptions that the absence of face-to-face instruction will ultimately lead to a loss of knowledge that was acquired by students as measured by standardized test scores from the previous year (Soland et al., 2020). It will be very interesting

to note the appropriateness of applying the concept of learning loss to students who are receiving virtual instruction or distance learning during the pandemic considering the strict requirements of California Senate Bill 98 (SB 98) for all schools to provide daily live interaction, content area teaching equivalent to in-person instruction, access to connectivity and devices, and other academic supports (Cummins, 2020). Moreover, the educators in the webinar panel (see Appendix A) expressed a unified view that "learning loss," although well-described quantitatively in literature, may be a classic form of deficit view in education (Valencia, 1997); collectively, as a group, they rejected the notion of learning loss as a manifestation of a deficit-based mindset. They discussed and expressed the belief that learning loss is based on deficit thinking that highlights the academic performance outcomes of students while deflecting the role of the schools in providing effective equitable ways to support student learning. In theory, deficit thinking is the perspective that emphasizes internal or external cultural deficiencies, which limits one's cognitive, linguistic, and motivational abilities for learning (Strikwerda, 2019). According to Valencia (1997) the deficit theory in education is pervasive because:

Of the several theories that have been advanced to explicate school failure among the economically disadvantaged minority students, the deficit model has held the strongest currency—spanning well over a century, with roots going back further to the beginning of American colonies of the 1600s. (p. 2)

It was revealing to hear how the panelists discussed the different ways districts approached the SB-98 Trailer Bill and this was a good reminder how, much like our society, districts are also uncertain how to effectively embrace learning during this time. The panelists considered how in meeting the requirements of the Trailer Bill, student engagement is one issue, while attendance is a completely different issue. For example, students can be marked present in their virtual classroom by logging into the live instructional meetings, turning in assignments, or through a parent notification via email or phone call to the teacher or office staff, and still not truly be engaged in their learning. The panelists shared how teachers are feeling frustrated as students seem unmotivated, unwilling to produce simple assignments, or respond to questions asked during live instruction. Thus, the notion of learning loss is perceived to be real when attendance is down and grades are continually dropping due to student disengagement and lack of doing work (Brume & Barajas, 2020).

Learning Loss or Learning that Has Not Been Attained?

As the pandemic spread in the spring of 2020, online, remote, or distance learning became the delivery mode of instruction. Because of this abrupt change and presumably, the relative unpreparedness of schools and most of its administrators and teachers, there was a reliance on asynchronous distance learning (Watson, 2020), banking model of instruction (Freire, 1970), and didactic teaching methods instead of collaboration, communication, critical thinking, and valuing the authentic voices and artistic expressions of students in either in-person or remote teaching contexts (Hollingsworth, 2020). Currently among educators, there seems to be an internal feeling of needing to make up for the time lost in the spring, as well as the beginning of this school year, which results in an overemphasis of pouring in as much information into students' heads as possible.

The panelists shared that even though students were given a device and a hotspot when

schools first shut down and converted to distance learning, some students feel uncomfortable showing their faces on camera while learning from the personal spaces of their rooms and homes. Students that are not as fortunate, might not want to reveal to their classmates the daily realities of their families' living environment. One panelist mentioned that some students live in a space of a rented garage and are ashamed of these realities. Another panelist shared how the living environments can be chaotic with babies crying and parents yelling, without the realization of how this may be impeding the learning of their students. Administrators, in the panel, commented that while doing virtual walkthroughs and classroom observations they noticed that mostly everyone keeps their cameras off and their microphones muted the entire time, which leads to little, or no lively interaction with the students at all. One panelist commented that teachers should embrace an asset-based approach, building off of the values that students already have, rather than looking at them with a deficit-based approach and seeing what they do not have. All panelists asserted that educators are the ones who must exhibit the high expectation that all students can learn. Not surprisingly, the panelists agreed that there is a need to redefine our purpose in education and approach in teaching during distance learning.

All the panelists raised excellent points about the new skills and cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1979b; 1987) that students are acquiring in this new setting. Cultural capital refers to culturally-based common practices of students that may put them at an advantage over others. Examples of culturally-based practices include cultural awareness, knowledge about a variety of practices at school, home, and community, as well as propensity for going to the museums and art exhibits, and taste of music, art, food, and other creative forms (Lalas et al., 2019). Some panelists believed that this new delivery of instruction via distance learning in students' homes may present a transformative opportunity to implement teaching and learning outside the hegemonic systems of schools by recognizing the wealth of students' funds of knowledge, which is comprised of the students' multiple identities, social backgrounds, and lived experiences at their home, neighborhoods, and communities (Macias & Lalas, 2014).

Subsequently, the group "moved forward" and discussed learning loss from an asset-based perspective. One of the panelists powerfully retorted, "How can you have 'learning loss'? Instead it should be defined as 'learning that has not been gained or obtained', so there's really nothing to lose!" The panelist continued by explaining how it is unjust to penalize students for opportunities that were never presented to learn. Instead of punishing and discouraging students by giving them low grades based on standardized curriculum and competitive forums, educators need to focus on creating opportunities for collaborative and compassionate learning where grades do not become the sole measure for knowledge that has been attained. At this time of the pandemic, educators need to rethink their traditional ways of measuring learning (Brume & Barajas, 2020) by discouraging standardized grading practices and instead, adopting more relatively progressive nontraditional virtual platforms. By continuing to grade and measure learning through traditional methods, teachers are essentially grading students, especially those from low-income families, without considering the quality of home resources, which include not only the physical space where learning is occurring, but also the availability of adults and parents who can support and supplement their learning in the home (Brume & Barajas, 2020).

Moving Away from a Deficit-Based Mindset and Moving Towards Asset-Based Learning

Clearly from the panelists' comments, the term learning loss does not appear to take into consideration the continual cultural and social learning that has been occurring in the students'

homes. One panelist stated, “The demographic divide is not new and these challenges have always plagued our diverse and historically underserved communities. It is now the time to change it.” From this panelist’s comment, it is inferable that educators and parents are attempting to adapt to an uncharted territory that requires flexibility in allowing diverse opportunities for students to demonstrate their learning in ways that are relevant and meaningful to them (Hollingsworth, 2020). Thereupon, the panelists switched up the whole idea of learning loss to learning gain, which may be liberating for the audience as expressed by some in the webinar chat. They explained how there is so much more learning that is occurring in the home that goes unrecognized.

In practice, we, the authors of this commentary, think that distance learning in virtual contexts are redefining the term homework as *home-work*, or work done at home. Students are engaged in doing *home-work* that is culturally and socially situated, which exemplify the use of funds of knowledge through very real-life experiences such as doing family chores, going grocery shopping with parents or older siblings, language translations for parents, babysitting, and using Algebra or math facts to purchase food and supplies (Gonzales et al., 2005; Moll et al., 1992). *Home-work*, as we call it in this commentary, tends not to be valued in education as a source of social and cultural learning gains. However, with due recognition of the importance of *home-work* and other funds of knowledge and home resources, the quality and quantity of online learning experiences children receive at home may improve (Erdogan et al., 2019). Thus, it is vital that parents and educators both recognize how their beliefs and values pertaining to virtual and physical spaces can enhance or impede the learning that occurs in students. The obvious practical solution is for school districts to invest in high-quality professional development on effective participation in distance learning for parents, teachers, and administrators.

The switch from deficit thinking to asset-based view must include the recognition of the important role homes can play in distance learning during the pandemic. One of the panelists made this powerful statement that, “generally, we need to move away from the thought that if students are not getting their knowledge from us, from teachers, that they aren't getting it at all.” For thinking to shift, the panelists agreed that transformation in our view of the role of homes in distance learning requires open courageous dialogue, extended conversations, and critical reflection.

What Can Administrators and Teachers do to Transform the System?

While all stakeholders want transformational change, it was evident by their comments that many felt constrained by the perpetuation of the top-down system. As administrators and teachers, we need to create a culture of authentic critical thinking that literally dismantles not just the prescriptivist nature of education, but also recognizes the communities that it benefits. This is the true essence of Freire's (1970) notion of humanization which requires educators to demonstrate true generosity in prioritizing the well-being of their students over detached policies and ideologies surrounding distance learning in general, and learning loss, in particular. Learning loss seems to be a concept driven by the educational system in describing the perceived negative impact on student outcomes due to school closure, rather than the school system’s failure to influence the attainment of student learning by further developing the students’ newly acquired proficiency in using technology, recognizing students’ funds of knowledge, providing parent training on the use of technology, and valuing how learning gain could be achieved in doing practical *home-work*. Whether a deficit- or asset-based lens is used in addressing learning loss, school leaders must be committed in making sure that equity is at forefront of their efforts in providing instructional

programs that meet the needs of all students, especially the most vulnerable—those who need the most assistance, and who are historically marginalized.

Strategies to Engage, Rethink, and Reimagine Education

It is time to rethink and reimagine education. This pandemic has shed light on the educational disparities, inequities, and injustices that are driven by a deficit view of learning and teaching. During COVID-19, attendance is down, students might not be as actively participating, and teachers and administrators may naturally assert that students are not motivated. However, educators need to reflect and think: Is it the digital divide? Is it our pedagogical practices? Or is it our mindset in approaching education in virtual contexts? If educators define learning loss as losing time and not experiencing school because of extended time away from face-to-face instruction, that could be the traditional way of looking at a loss. Perhaps, our students are not coming back to us with a “learning loss,” but rather bring with them many life-skills and academic competencies gained during this time of online education—learning that would not have been attained in the traditional classroom setting.

Therefore, moving forward to enhance learning acceleration, all educators, including school leaders and teachers, must be facilitators of knowledge and engagement (Lalas & Strikwerda, 2020). Although there are specific complementary strategies that have been recommended such as “high-dosage tutoring” and “accelerated learning” (Sellery, 2021), more importantly, school leaders need to provide opportunities for students to experience trusting their capabilities and to know that they can use their voice, think critically, and ask questions. All educators need to provide safe virtual spaces which allow students to teach each other, while the teacher steps back and guides the conversations. It is also very important to use assessments and checking for understanding to get to know who the students are and how they learn. Creating an environment with relevant activities that students can connect to and find interesting will help them make meaning and have a successful learning experience (Hollingsworth, 2020). Educators and school leaders can increase learning by accepting our students' background knowledge and home resources as assets and finding ways to embrace the essence of teaching as a joyful rigorous experience.

Take-Away: Equity in Virtual or Physical Contexts as a Solution for Learning Loss

Education is a conscious decision-making process. While all of us must recognize the possibility of learning loss, we must at the same time ascertain that the talents of all students including the historically marginalized are valued. Consequently, when they are given opportunities to demonstrate their abilities in ways that are meaningful and relevant to them, learning gain might naturally occur as a predictable outcome. School leaders and teachers must embrace the true notion of equity in envisioning virtual spaces that accept, value, and provide diverse opportunities for our students to demonstrate what knowledge they acquired during the pandemic, and recognize these as a learning gain.

As covered in this webinar, the participating administrators and teachers shared their understanding of learning loss, described the various equitable ways of addressing it, how they handle instruction in virtual spaces while they value their students' assets, and how they provide them opportunities for meaningful engagement. Likewise, Lalas and Strikwerda (2020) support the following implications from the webinar which advises administrators, school leaders,

teachers, parents, and all school personnel that, in providing equitable learning across virtual or physical spaces, they must be cognizant of and prepared to address the following:

- Identifying experiences of anxiety and discomfort in discovering different ways and practices of learning.
- Acknowledging that students have different needs, attention, and services and value what students can do to inform our decisions.
- Allowing students to articulate their own stories and experiences with trauma and social isolation.
- Recognizing students' personal identities as an expression of their authentic voices and identifying the unique talents of students.

Identifying Experiences of Anxiety and Discomfort in Discovering Different Ways and Practices of Learning

Distance learning has caused parents, educators, and students to pivot quickly and rapidly. All educators have been going through the discomfort of change while continually problem solving how to make this mode of learning effective. There is anxiety that naturally exists in the unknown realm of distance learning, while excitement and joy abounds in the adventure of discovery of new practices and learning experiences.

Good intentions from educators and parents are not enough. Educators and school leaders have to discover, reflect, and refine what pedagogical practices are effective in virtual spaces. They have to continue exploring the different ways students can divulge in and pursue their identity, skills, intellect, and criticality, while presenting them with culturally relevant and historically responsive texts and lesson plans (Muhammad, 2020). Parents and educators alike need to be committed and willing to try new methods of teaching and learning that equitably meet the needs of students (Lalas & Strikwerda, 2020).

Acknowledging that Students Have Different Needs, Attention, and Services and Value What Students Can Do to Inform Our Decisions

Students do not come to us as blank slates, but rather, they embody all the vast array of knowledge and different experiences they have acquired since their birth. Thus, it is imperative for educators, including parents, to understand who their students are, how they learn, and what educators can do to motivate and facilitate their engagement in physical and virtual spaces (Lalas et al., 2019). Even during this ongoing pandemic, students still engaged in distance learning are able to gain new abilities by combining the new ways of learning and modes of expression that they are acquiring in this technological mode of instructional delivery.

The transition to teaching and learning through virtual spaces has deepened the digital divide and exacerbated educational inequities experienced mostly by students who are historically marginalized (Hollingsworth, 2020). Even though school districts have triumphantly and generously distributed electronic devices and hot spots to help provide equal learning conditions, the inevitability of inequality currently abounds (Schneiderman, 2018, p.5). Even with these inequalities, students are taking what they know and have learned and are finding ways to build, apply, and expand their knowledge in meaningful and relevant ways.

Allowing Students to Articulate Their Own Stories and Experiences With Trauma and Social Isolation

Empowering students begins with providing safe in-person or virtual spaces where they can share their social and cultural experiences. Opening space for opportunities like these creates the condition for students to know each other better, fosters empathy, and builds trust with their peers and their teachers. It may help them to build self-confidence and experience a sense of belonging in their physical or virtual classrooms. It also provides the needed venue for students who are already feeling the pressure and emotions from the daily realities of many social, cultural, and life issues to release these emotions and thoughts in productive, supportive, and respectful ways.

In addition to building trust and empathy, providing opportunities for students to articulate their stories also creates a safe environment where students can recognize their commonalities within humanity by seeing themselves in others (Boyd et al., 2015). Relatability in human experiences creates a sense of unity within diversity. During times of crises, students need to feel socially and emotionally connected, while honoring their unique voices and feelings that shape their current realities. Providing opportunities for storytelling and shared experiences is fundamental in creating an equitable, peaceful, and caring world (Boyd et al., 2015).

Recognizing Students' Personal Identities as an Expression of Their Authentic Voices and Identify the Unique Talents of Students

Recognition is a powerful tool that can be used to provide much needed educational justice and equity. As stated in Nancy Fraser's book (1997), "nonrecognition and misrecognition... can be a form of oppression, imprisoning someone in a false, distorted, reduced mode of being. Beyond simple lack of respect, it can inflict a grievous wound, saddling people with crippling self-hatred. Due recognition is not just a courtesy, but a vital human need" (Fraser, 1997, p. 14). Similar to adults, students desire to be recognized as having their own consequential identities, and to be valued and honored for their individual talents and skills. They want to be seen, heard, attended to, and cared for. When students feel that their classroom environments do not allow for recognition of who they are, they may disengage and find other ways to feel connected and express themselves.

It is important that virtual and physical classroom spaces provide opportunities for identity development and expression. Educators, school leaders, and parents need to recognize, value, and celebrate students' diverse talents and provide various opportunities for them to demonstrate what they know and learn by redistributing resources and services equitably as they learn about each student's unique individual strengths and weaknesses.

Conclusion

In conclusion, as the pandemic continues to highlight the challenges in teaching and learning in our current educational system, school leaders must always maintain hope and continue the discussion of equity beyond these tumultuous times. Administrators, as well as teachers, are academic leaders who must have the conviction, commitment, professional competence, and generosity to play a huge role in identifying, planning, and implementing equitable educational solutions as they advocate for educational justice for all. They must be comfortable in exercising

their personal and professional freedom of choice to release authority and redistribute power, when needed, and empower students with platforms that allow and encourage them to speak and visualize themselves as our nation's future leaders with the inherent capacity to make much needed equitable change within their social and cultural contexts in virtual or physical spaces. This type of leadership disposition and mindset would create and foster a primary belief of hope among our most vulnerable and traditionally underserved students. Conversely, although we join educators, administrators, and parents in recognizing the resiliency of students, we must not overestimate their attributes as individuals and underestimate the influencing power of the educational system.

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Appendix A

Webinar Panel

The webinar panelists include:

Sandy Torres, Principal Colton Joint USD,

Dr. Maria Ordaz, Assistant Principal, Rialto USD,

Dr. Chris Jackson, Math Coach, Rialto USD,

Frank Mata, High School AP English Teacher, Corona-Norco USD,

David Dillion, History Teacher and Instructional Planner, Riverside USD, and,

Dr. Rachael ReHage, English Teacher Redlands USD.