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Remote Learning and the Struggles it Bears

Is virtual learning the bane of modern education? As news about rising cases of a novel Coronavirus took over headlines around the world, students and teachers from schools of all levels were pushed to make a rapid switch from brick and mortar classrooms to remote instruction in the month of March. However, not every school and every teacher is offering the same level of instruction and quality of learning. Moreover, not all students are able to access what their school is offering. This unprecedented situation has proven to be challenging for everyone involved. Teachers, as well as their students have felt ill-prepared for this transition. The situation escalated rapidly, especially in New York City, the hub of the crisis, where students attended school on Friday March 13, and then it came Sunday with the news that schools will be closed until further notice, with no time to plan for what was to come. The obvious “solution” was online learning, but not everyone has access to what is needed to make it work smoothly, and it comes with its challenges.

Teachers and students struggle as work and family life suddenly intertwine in the same confined space. Families are having to convert dining tables to workstations. Some people do not have their own spaces in their homes to work and it becomes more difficult to be productive with surrounding noise. Teachers and students are having to share a computer, tablet, and/or their smartphones, as their internet connectivity slows down, since everyone is working at the same time to be able to meet the many demands of remote learning and working. Working hours have been extended to night shifts for many students, “I sleep during the day, and do my things at night, because that is the only time I can do things without my family being on top of what I’m doing” said a highschool student. “Yes, I usually go to bed at around 5 in the morning, I wake up at 8:20am to sign-in for attendance, then go right back to bed” another student agreed in a virtual interview.

 Regardless of the option of virtual learning through systems like Zoom and Google Classroom, school closures around the globe have also faced sudden adjustments to processes that go beyond models of remote learning. For example changes and cancellation of events that are important in the education system due to this pandemic. The cancellation of examinations such as ACTs, SATs, etc. is one of the changes that brings anxiety and incertitude to many students, particularly those counting on those processes for their future. Additionally, new grading policies have come to be that are more flexible for students. As grading systems become much more lenient considering these difficult times, the answer to whether it is a good or bad thing is yet to be known. Students have an overload of work and emails coming in from teachers, and teachers have to look after their own families, while still balancing meetings with students and grading work. Not being able to physically go to class and talk to teachers can have disadvantages because it is harder to learn when it is difficult to get questions answered and issues addressed. Student learning outcomes are negatively impacted when learning online because this type of learning requires self motivation. Additionally, taking part in hands-on activities can be a significantly more effective learning strategy for many and this is ripped away during online learning.

The fact that there is an unequal access to technology between students does not make it any easier to learn. Not having that access to technology makes it difficult for some to get their required work in or attend live classes. Whether it be not having the proper equipment like a computer or laptop, or not having internet access, there is still a divide between students who have access to technology and those who do not. Not only can this affect their academic lives, but also their social lives. Not being able to connect with friends and family can be difficult for everyone, and this adds to the level of anxiety for both teachers and students.

It would be unfair to say this new development of remote learning was poorly executed, but greater measures and preparation could have been taken in order to have a better remote learning experience that does not exclude anybody. The socioemotional and academic impact that this COVID-19 crisis is having on students, teachers, and parents is hard to evaluate, but one thing is true: As we continue to learn the ropes of this unparallelled circumstance together and make changes to be able to support and be inclusive to everyone, things will hopefully come much easier.