

Report of American Public Education under the Pandemic

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Remote learning for the public school students has started in most parts of the United States. I believe that the biggest difference in the circumstances surrounding the Japanese and the American children during this pandemic is their family's stress levels. Over 50% of the households in public school systems in the U.S. are considered low income(1), and when 22 million Americans have already lost their jobs due to this pandemic(2), many parents are hit with huge financial and emotional stress. Their stress and fear will surely transfer to their children.

The main concern for the educators in the U.S. in the time of Pandemic is not about keeping up with the curriculum but about supporting students' social emotional well-being(3). The educators are emphasizing that students' mental health is at stake; there will be no permanent damage if the students didn't master the curriculum fully, but there could be lasting trauma if their mental health was not taken care of. It is imperative that educators support their students' mental health by having video conferencing at least 2 or 3 times a week to maintain the sense of classroom community, and facilitating class discussion so the students could share their experiences and feelings.

Remote Learning sounded to me like teachers streaming live lessons for the whole school hours in real time. Some private schools and colleges are carrying out this kind of synchronous remote learning indeed, however synchronous remote learning will create more digital inequity. Some public school students come from households with no device or internet access. Even in the households that have devices and are connected to the internet, it is likely that the students need to share devices and limited data among family members. It is unreasonable to expect these students to attend synchronous (live) online teaching for the whole day, every day.

To make sure not to widen digital inequity, most school districts like the public charter school in Hawaii I used to teach in, offer a blend of synchronous remote learning through

video conferences 2 or 3 times a week, asynchronous remote learning (such as giving assignments to watch previously recorded video clips), and traditional paper-and-pencil assignments, so the students have choices among these three mediums. There are school districts like Philadelphia School District which decided that remote instruction should not be provided to students for fear of widening the digital inequity, while some PTAs in those districts believe that schools shouldn't restrict learning opportunities for those students who have access to the technology for the fear of widening the digital inequity(4). It is one of the most hotly debated topics right now in the education field.

For those students who do not have a device or internet access at home, schools are lending devices but sometimes there is not enough. Some school districts are turning school buses into hotspots for internet access and placing them around their districts. Some educators are saying even with devices and internet access, they don't know how to provide training for students and family to use them.

This pandemic had some researchers speculate that Remote Learning will be the mainstream of education. However in the U.S., where the need for Social Emotional Learning in schools has been the center of the attention in recent years, the majority opinion seems to be that this pandemic will prove how significant communities such as schools and classrooms, relationship between teachers and students, and face to face learning are in education, and that it cannot be replaced by technology. Educators should remember that too many assignments will be an additional stress to the already stressed out parents and students, and it will be counterproductive in building trust. Some school districts in NY recommend giving out a quarter of the normal amount of assignments at times like this(5). Also the public charter school I used to teach in presents the assignments once a week rather than giving them daily assignments, so the families can coordinate sharing of the devices, and be more flexible in supporting the learning throughout the week.

It was a pleasant surprise, in this chaos, to hear many strong voices advocating that students' mental health comes first.

(1)Long, Heather, U.S. now has 22 million unemployed, wiping out a decade of job gains, *Washington Post*, April 17, 2020.<https://www.washingtonpost.com/business/2020/04/16/unemployment-claims-coronavirus/> .

(2)Kamenetz, Anya, The Biggest Distance-Learning Experiment In History: Week One, NPR.org, March 26, 2020.
<https://www.npr.org/2020/03/26/821921575/the-biggest-distance-learning-experiment-in-history-week-one>.

(3)Walker, Tim, Social Emotional Learning Should Be Priority During Covid-19 Crisis, National Education Association, April 15, 2020.<http://neatoday.org/2020/04/15/social-emotional-learning-during-covid/>; Mandy Froehlich et al., 12 Ways You Can Meet Students' Social-Emotional Needs While Teaching Online, Apple Podcast; Teachers Aid, March 28, 2020.

<https://podcasts.apple.com/us/podcast/12-ways-you-can-meet-students-social-emotional-needs/id368754208?i=1000469831709>

(4)Wolfman-Arent, Avi, Philly schools forbid graded 'remote instruction' during shutdown for equity concerns, The Philadelphia Tribune, March 18, 2020.

https://www.phillytrib.com/news/health/coronavirus/philly-schools-forbid-graded-remote-instruction-during-shutdown-for-equity/article_71e49569-ee6a-5d63-a89e-7e48188319a9.html

(5)Sherrin, David, Maslow Before Bloom's: Clarifying Our Priorities As Teaching Goes Online, BAM Radio; K12 Greatest Hits, March 24, 2020



My former Kindergarten students presenting at their Curriculum Share at Innovations Public Charter School (IPCS) in Hawaii. IPCS embraces Project Based Learning and this day was their Curriculum Share where student groups (usually 3 to 4 students) present what they have learned and present in front of parents and students from other grade levels. Students are encouraged to think of ways to use their findings for the good of the community. By teaching the community, the students gain confidence and find their voices in this world.

About the Author

Aiko Ioh

I was born in New York, and grew up going back and forth between Tokyo and New York. After earning a B.A. in Political Science from Keio University in Japan, I moved to New York against my family and friends' advice at the age of 28, to get a Master's degree in Early Childhood Education (Birth ~ 2nd grade). I taught as a head teacher in a private preschool in Manhattan for 7 years, and then taught Kindergarten for 5 years at Innovations Public Charter School(IPCS) in Hawaii. IPCS is a Kindergarten~8th grade Public School which embraces Project Based Learning(PBL) to educate the Whole Child, and being a teacher there took so much work (so much so that I didn't have much time to enjoy beautiful beaches there!) but it was also very inspiring and fulfilling. I am now back on the East Coast, looking for a school that embraces Whole Child Education and/or PBL. Looking back, the first time I ever thought, "Being a teacher seems interesting!" was in Mr. Nambu's (Research Group for Global Educators) classroom as a 12-year-old. Mr. Nambu introduced me to the Japanese model of the Tokkatsu curriculum last year, and Dr. Tsuneyoshi introduced me to the Global Tokkatsu Project and the Multicultural Leadership Project which are very enthralling to me. My favorite thing to do is to enjoy diverse cultures in an authentic, hands-on way in New York City, the melting pot of the cultures!

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