



THE NOT SO SUBTLE **INEQUITY** OF REMOTE LEARNING

by Christopher H. Tienken
Academic Editor

Abstract

The author argues that providing students with access to resources—without the necessary supports to make full use of that access—creates educational inequity.

Key words: COVID-19 schooling, educational equity, remote learning

The shutdown of face-to-face schooling in the spring of 2020 brought on by the COVID-19 global pandemic ushered in a transition to what some termed *remote education*. For the first time in the history of the United States, approximately 56 million of America's public school students were not able to physically attend school for an extended period of time. The American Association of School Administrators (2020) reported that about 85% of school districts provided some form of online instruction, and approximately 82% of districts provided laptops or tablets for students to access online instruction during the initial Covid-19 shutdown. Student access to the Internet and devices able to connect to the Internet were crucial resources for students to access their schools' learning opportunities.

Most students had access to the Internet at the time of the school shutdown. The National Center for Education Statistics (NCES, 2020) reported that 94% of students ages 3 to 18 have Internet access, whereas 6% of students, almost 3.4 million, do not have any Internet access. Access to an educational resource does not itself ensure equitable education. In fact, defining educational equity through

the narrow lens of access to resources produces greater inequity. Access to resources must be accompanied by the supports necessary to make full use of the access.

Closer Look

A closer look at Internet access reveals that not all access is created equal. Who has access and the quality of that access falls along racial and socioeconomic lines. NCES (2020) reported that of the 94% of students with Internet access, 6% had access only through a smartphone. Smartphones are not optimal for teaching and learning for obvious reasons, some of which are the way certain applications display—or don't—on small screens, the lack of tools necessary to interact with some content, and the difficulty with creating in-depth responses to assignments. I term smartphone access as entertainment-level access. It is good for watching short videos, making brief comments, and surfing the Web. Smartphone access is not sufficient for learning that requires ongoing concentration and commitment. Coupled with the 6% of students without any form of Internet access, the United States has 12% of its public school population without sufficient Internet access necessary for formal schooling—approximately 6.8 million students (NCES, 2020).



Christopher H. Tienken is an Associate Professor of Education Leadership, Management, and Policy at Seton Hall University in New Jersey. His books include *The School Reform Landscape: Fraud, Myth, and Lies*; *Education Policy Perils*; and *Defying Standardization*. For more information go to www.christienken.com. Email: Christopher.Tienken@shu.edu

The opinions expressed in this editorial are those of the author and do not reflect any official position of Kappa Delta Pi, International Honor Society in Education.

NCES (2020) reported that students with sufficient Internet access for schooling purposes are often White, living in households with incomes of \$75,000 or more. Only about 3% of White students must rely on their smartphones for Internet access. In contrast 11% of Black and 10% of Hispanic students have Internet access only via a smartphone. Only 1% of families with parents who have bachelor's degrees must use their smartphones for Internet access compared to 17% of those without a high school diploma and 12% with a high school diploma. Nearly 35% of students living in households without broadband Internet do so because it is too expensive. Only 25% of White families without Internet cited cost as the reason, compared to 45% of Hispanic families and 39% of Black families. Poverty is clearly an impediment to Internet access; but even if access became universal, poverty still creates education inequity.

Resource View of Equity

A common solution to the persistent differences in student achievement, suggested in the education reform literature, is to provide students with more resources. Defining this strategy as the “resource-based perspective” of education reform, Scherrer (2014) explained, “The effects of poverty can be buffered by giving students high-quality school-based resources (e.g., better teachers, and more of them). Specifically, a resource-based perspective focuses on the first dimension of poverty—disparities in specific resources” (p. 202). Certainly, quality resources are a necessity for an equitable education experience. But differences in student achievement and learning exist even in places where everyone has the same resources. That is because resources alone (i.e., “stuff”) can't overcome the dampening effect poverty has on learning.

Pascoe, Wood, Duffee, and Kuo (2016) explained that students from poverty experience anxiety, stress, trauma, food and housing insecurity, violence, and health insecurity at much higher rates than their well-off peers. Pascoe and colleagues (2016) stated that evidence from more than 50 years of studies suggests, “Poverty has direct negative effects on early brain development through the mechanism of toxic stress” (p. e3). Students living in poverty need more and different types of supports than their well-off peers to make full use of the resources provided to them. Simply providing Internet access and a complementary device will not bring educational equity to remote learning.

Capabilities Perspective

Scherrer (2014) urged policymakers and educators to shift their attention from a resource-based perspective to a “capabilities perspective” to begin to mitigate some of the negative effects of poverty. Scherrer (2014) wrote, “Specifically, a capabilities perspective focuses on the second dimension of poverty—ability to convert resources into their intended benefits” (p. 203). Through the lens of the capabilities perspective, “The value of a proposed resource is judged to be lower when an individual does not have the capability to make use of the resource being presented to her” (Scherrer, 2014, p. 203). For example, providing a student with a complementary device might have a limited impact if the student's Internet access is not strong enough to stream videos or download educational content. Likewise, having a strong Internet connection but having only one device in the home that the student must share with parents and siblings will do little to improve equity. Thus, Internet access and a complementary device can produce two different results when given to two different students, based on the supports each student has to turn those resources into intended outcomes.

Teachers experience the “capabilities perspective” all the time during face-to-face instruction in which all students have equal access to a device, Internet, textbook, pencils, and so forth when in school, yet students perform in different ways. But the differences are even more pronounced in remote settings. Some students thrive while engaged in remote learning, while other students, in the same class, with access to seemingly similar resources, struggle to survive. The strength of one's Internet connection and the number of devices in the house are just two examples of how resources can seem similar but be inequitable. While learning remotely, some students have had a parent/guardian or a skilled sibling to help them with their work, whereas some students were generally on their own to figure things out. Some students are in homes in which food and stress were not issues, whereas other children have had their worlds turned upside down because family members lost jobs, could not pay bills, and had limited access to affordable and quality food sources.

Remote learning requires “at the elbow” support. That is the type of support that is immediately available when the instructional video does not work, or the student does not know how to manipulate the HyperDoc assignment, or the student just does not understand the directions. If support is not timely and accurate, students disengage, become frustrated, and underachieve. Remote learning is so dependent on factors outside the control of school that I believe it should be renamed *independent schooling*.

Take Action

Educators are not going to solve the problem of childhood poverty in the United States. Addressing childhood poverty is a choice that societies make. Nearly 20% of all children in the United States live in poverty (National Center for Children in Poverty, 2019). That figure places the United States near the bottom of the rankings of the 35 most industrialized countries in terms of poverty. Only the American electorate can bring change to this embarrassingly high percentage of childhood poverty. But educators can add more supports to their remote learning lessons to help ease some of the pressure poverty places on learning.

Like face-to-face lessons, remote learning lessons need to include examples, models, and clear directions—all the planned aspects of face-to-face lessons, but to a greater degree. Remote lessons also need to include the intangibles: the hints, targeted tips, and verbal directions that educators provide “on the fly” to help students when they become stuck, frustrated, or confused. Educators should reflect on all the types of support and coaching they provide when face-to-face—even the things they don’t formally plan. Things that are said in the classroom during the course of a normal lesson are just as important as the planned examples, models, and directions built into each lesson.

Prerecorded videos and voice files embedded in remote lessons can provide an extra layer of support. Teachers need to anticipate the questions and confusion students will have with assignments and build those supports, directions, tips, examples, and models into their remote materials to help students stay engaged and feel successful. The sup-

ports need to be embedded at key points in lessons where teachers anticipate confusion, to create that “at the elbow” support even though the teacher is not physically with the student.

Live videoconference sessions also can be used to provide that face-to-face feeling, but they come with their own set of cautions. Some parents feel it is an invasion of privacy, and others do not want their children on video because some platforms have been hacked and children have been exposed to inappropriate material. Other parents worry that their child’s picture could be taken and then circulated on social media. School leaders should have clear policies and procedures for live videoconferences. If a policy does not exist at their school, teachers should ask the principal for specific guidance.

Paper resources are also effective to provide students with support. Some schools have policies that do not allow paper resources to be distributed, but I think this is shortsighted thinking. Quite frankly, not everything works well in the online environment. Tried-and-true paper resources can be an effective complement to online lessons in the remote environment and should not be arbitrarily dismissed.

Closing Thoughts

Remote learning will be with us for some time, as will the equity issues associated with it. Although the perfect solution to inequity is decreasing the levels of childhood poverty, educators do not have to let “perfect” get in the way of doing “better” for students. Teachers can mitigate some of the inequities by creating supports within their remote learning lessons to provide “at the elbow” support for students who might need it. ■

References

- American Association of School Administrators. (2020, April 6). AASA COVID-19 school response study. Retrieved from <https://aasa.org/policy-blogs.aspx?id=44619&blogid=84002>
- National Center for Children in Poverty. (2019). Child poverty. Retrieved from <http://www.nccp.org/topics/childpoverty.html>
- National Center for Education Statistics. (2020, May). Children’s Internet access at home. Retrieved from https://nces.ed.gov/programs/coe/indicator_cch.asp#info
- Pascoe, J. M., Wood, D. L., Duffee, J. H., & Kuo, A. (2016). Mediators and adverse effects of child poverty in the United States. *Pediatrics*, 137(4), e1–e17. <https://doi.org/10.1542/peds.2016-0340>
- Scherrer, J. (2014). The role of the intellectual in eliminating the effects of poverty: A response to Tierney. *Educational Researcher*, 43(4), 201–207. <http://doi.org/10.3102/0013189X14528242>