

Chapter 2

A Critical Review of Secondary Educational Shifts to Online Learning Modalities in the COVID–19 Pandemic

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ABSTRACT

The widespread impact of the COVID-19 pandemic affected K12 schools globally. This unprecedented disruption to education transformed teaching and learning experiences for children, teachers, administrators, and parents in many ways. The challenge of shifting traditional classroom teaching to online and distance modalities were met with various responses by school leaders and communities across the globe. This critical review highlights recent responses to continuing education for K12 students through collaborative efforts as the delivery of instruction as redefined and redesigned to meet the needs of children. Despite the lack of preparedness for this sudden shift to online learning, K12 district leaders and other stakeholders demonstrated their commitment to navigate through this crisis head-on. While disparities and unequal access became more evident during this unforeseen time, the future of online learning can be strengthened by this experience. This awareness can lead to further improvements in K12 education to serve all children with equity despite the circumstances.

INTRODUCTION

According to the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), over 1.5 billion students were impacted by school closures as a response to the onset of the COVID-19 (Harris, 2020; Lynch, 2020; Noor et al., 2020). The Coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) has indefinitely changed K12 educational practices for all organizational levels across the globe (Noor et al., 2020). Traditional educational approaches have been altered and blended to present emergency solutions for continual teaching in response to a health threatening crisis (Middleton, 2020). Administrative processes

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previously used to manage change implementation were replaced by immediate demands for decision making to occur on all levels of leadership within the school system (Harris, 2020). Reactionary plans were developed and initiated to keep students learning during a global pandemic.

Through these unprecedented times, and months after closure and emergency distance learning, districts began to reopen their campuses. Education government agencies issued directives that held school district leaders, administrators, and educators accountable to continue teaching students using various modalities. Whether face-to-face, online, or a combination of modalities, also known as hybrid, school districts formulated plans to offer families options. For example, The Florida Department of Education (2020) published a reopening plan to provide guidance to school districts as local leaders began discussions to develop their education continuity plans. The FLDOE allowed for locally driven decisions to be made by district leaders with given recommendations which included resorting optimal learning opportunities for all students (FLDOE, 2020). Additionally, the FLDOE supported reopening plans across public school districts that included giving parents a choice in learning modality options most suitable for their needs. Face-to-face, online learning, and hybrid learning options became part of the continuity plan to accommodate families and medically vulnerable individuals (FLDOE, 2020).

Although research on online learning present advantages that support student learning (Allen & Seaman, 2013; Dhawan, 2020; Picciano, 2015), this particular circumstance of emergency online teaching and learning has left the future of education with many unknowns (Lynch, 2020). Moreover, Hughes et al. (2020) noted the focus of the transition to remote learning was not well-planned with assignments and assessments designed for online learning; instead, face-to-face coursework was adapted for virtual teaching. The challenge for teachers to move from offline teaching to online (Dhawan, 2020), and the lack of knowledge of pedagogical approaches to teach online (Middleton, 2020) present problems that impact the effectiveness of K12 online learning during the pandemic. Time constraints to better prepare for such an unprecedented educational transformation presented a problem needing further investigation. The implications of such a large-scale shift in teaching and learning have yet to be determined.

Numerous researchers concluded a major problem in achievement gaps amongst students has further widened as a result of this experimental teaching transformation during the pandemic. The education system has known a particular structure to operate by for decades and this drastic change in learning modalities ultimately means that students' learning is being compromised (Bhamani et al., 2020). Additionally, "prior evidence in K-12 and in higher education comparing students in virtual courses and those in in-person classrooms tended to find that the online setting is currently less effective, especially for those with lower prior performance" (Hart et al., 2019). Consequently, already existing achievement gaps will most likely widen, especially for students from lower socioeconomic brackets; addressing disparities among students need to be assessed (Middleton, 2020; Richmond et al., 2020).

BACKGROUND

Harris (2020) reported the certainty that COVID-19 disrupted and radically changed K12 schooling globally. While this pandemic caused schools around the globe to rapidly transform traditional face-to-face teaching to offer distance learning, this sudden change did not come without challenges of inequity, uncertainties regarding the quality of online instruction, and the impact of online learning on student performance (Adnan & Anwar, 2020). Additionally, although online learning provided schools with an alternative way to resume learning, the outcome of such a large-scale change on education will unravel

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