

Pandemic Reminders About Inclusivity and Accessibility: For Now and in the Future

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Using the case study of a second-grade urban educator, this chapter details her approach to teaching and learning during the 2020-2021 pandemic school year and makes clear how equitable remote learning spaces are designed. The authors examine the instructional moves that provide a diverse classroom of students with opportunities to learn, demonstrate their knowledge, and affirm their voice and identity. The purpose of this chapter is to 1) retell this educator's journey during the pandemic to pivot her practice in ways that demonstrate lessons we can learn about inclusion, accessibility, and equity in remote classrooms; 2) explore the equitable and inclusive practices of remote learning that support meeting all students' needs; and 3) endorse the position that the application of these inclusive practices should not fade away when the pandemic ends but remain an integral part of teacher preparation and student learning.

INTRODUCTION

If we give our children sound self-love, they will be able to deal with whatever life puts before them. (hooks, 1999)

When schools initially shut down to minimize the spread of COVID-19 in the Spring of 2020, there was a mad dash to ensure that students were able to access their learning away from their schools through the most efficient and accessible means: the internet. Students were given computers and families in need were assisted with internet access. Supplies and learning materials such as paper, glue, scissors, and books were also provided to ensure that students could fully engage in learning without the hindrances caused by not having basic resources.

Under constantly changing guidance and many unknowns, teachers were given very little turnaround time to recreate their physical classrooms in virtual settings and begin teaching remotely. Many teachers had never been exposed to online learning or had little to no formal professional development in the best practices to facilitate it. While schools and districts did provide professional development, the majority of teacher development and preparation involved educational technology tools and different forms of technology integration; some missed out on providing what is arguably the professional development that teachers needed the most: pedagogical practices for the effective delivery of online learning. As a result, and to no fault of their own, there were teachers facilitating online learning based on principles meant for teaching and learning in a physical classroom; and many teachers were left to their own devices to figure out how to best meet the needs of their students during a global pandemic.

This sudden transition from a traditional face-to-face learning structure to an online learning mode of delivery is what scholars refer to as emergency remote teaching (ERT). The distinctions between ERT, remote teaching, and online learning as forms of distance learning are significant: ERT refers to a short-term change in the delivery of instruction in response to a crisis (Hodges et al., 2020); remote teaching is “described as true contingency planning for remote or distance delivery of instruction based on the realities” that inhibit conditions for brick-and-mortar learning (Barbour et al., 2020); and, online learning is a form of distance learning that involves long-term cycles of systematic planning, evaluation, and review and references a growing body of knowledge that dates back to the 1940s.

The purpose of this chapter is to explore and highlight equitable and inclusive practices for remote learning by definition: beyond the context of emergency response protocols and after teachers were able to plan for the new school year in the Fall of 2020. Using a second-grade classroom as a case study, equitable and inclusive practices for remote learning, which include online learning and hybrid modes of delivery, are discussed. This approach uses real experiences to connect and integrate existing and emerging best practices that prioritize inclusivity, accessibility, and equity for all learners. Moreover, this approach endorses the position that the application of these best practices and strategies should not fade away when the pandemic ends but remain an integral part of teacher preparation, professional development, and student learning.

The chapter begins by examining distance learning within the frame of public education in the United States. Then, Ms. Crayon¹, a second-grade teacher in the Midwest, is introduced. Through Ms. Crayon’s lens and the examination of her approach to teaching and learning during the 2020-2021 school year, this chapter will make clear how equitable learning spaces are designed and detail the instructional moves that provide all students with opportunities to demonstrate their knowledge and affirm their voice and identity. This chapter will unpack the theoretical stance of constructivist teaching approaches used, surface culturally responsive learning strategies, and detail the inclusive use of technology, all in support of nurturing, accessible, and equitable remote and hybrid contexts. This chapter continues with a look at dynamic approaches to assessment and concludes with a discussion about ways to find joy in teaching and learning as a remedy to the trauma and challenges of these times.

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