CLOSING THE ACHIEVEMENT GAP FOR YOUNG STUDENTS

Social Justice, Virtual Learning, COVID, and Beyond

EDITORS NOTE
Education experts predict that learning loss will largely affect young students who typically experience in-person learning. In this Spotlight, explore how experts are projecting learning gaps from closures, how teachers are using edtech in early childhood education, and how educators are teaching literacy amid closures.

COVID-Related Learning Loss Will Hit Younger Students Differently

How Can Video Lessons Affect Learning for the Youngest Students?

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OPINION

Four Strategies for Getting the First 10 Years of a Child’s Life Right

How to Really Close Opportunity Gaps During Our National Racial Reckoning
Educators are bracing for students to return to school this fall with significant learning loss, after more than six months of disruption from the coronavirus pandemic. New research suggests schools will need to target interventions differently for students in different grades and subjects.

Researchers with the assessment group IlluminateEducation analyzed more than 500,000 computer-adaptive test scores in reading and math from kindergarten through 5th grade students in reading and math between fall and spring tests in the 2018-19 and 2019-20 school years. The data were used to project the difference in growth between the two years and the extent of learning loss in each grade and subject.

They found students in all grades and subjects had learning loss during the pandemic school closures this spring, but they followed different patterns. Kindergartners and 1st graders lost the most ground in general reading growth, but rising 5th graders lost the most fluency in reading aloud. Across every grade, students lost more learning in math than in reading, losing two and a half to four and a half months of learning, compared to a month or two in reading.

“It’s a little bit like riding a bike,” said John Bellinski, a co-author of the study and Illuminate’s senior director of research and development. “If we were to start teaching a kid how to ride a bike and then stopped. And then three months later said, okay, can you ride a bike? They probably won’t be able to—they will have forgotten what they learned—but once they’ve mastered riding a bike, if they don’t ride for few months, they probably can get on a bike and ride again.”

“So in K-2 we see relatively dramatic losses, from the foundational reading skills that kids build on to become proficient readers like phonics and phonological awareness,” he said. “By
grade 4 and 5, reading is more about comprehension ... and we see very little loss in reading."

A similar Brookings Institution study of upper elementary and middle school grades showed that while the average reading growth did not change much from 4th to 8th grades, the range of students’ development widened, particularly in grades 6 and 8. In math, by contrast, students had lower math development as well as a wider range of achievement across the board. In math, too, the 6th grade transition year saw a particularly sharp learning loss.

The new study did not dig into which topics students were most likely to lose, but Rachael Brown, senior academic officer and co-author of the study, hazarded a guess: “From the standpoint of what’s happening in the curriculum, 4th-, 5th grade and into 6th grade is the introduction of fractions, decimals and all manner of rational numbers,” she said. “Well, we know that’s where many kids struggle in mathematics, and take that together with COVID and things are just going to be at a difficulty level that they haven’t encountered before.”

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How Can Video Lessons Affect Learning for the Youngest Students?

By Sarah D. Sparks

Preschool and early elementary teachers face some of the greatest unknowns when dealing with remote learners during the pandemic. There has been relatively little research on very young students learning remotely, but emerging research on video lessons could provide clues for educators working to stem learning loss.

One new analysis in the journal Child Development finds that children ages 6 and under scored, on average across tests and learning domains, half of a standard deviation higher if they had been taught information via face-to-face instruction compared to video. To put that in context, if young children learning through video performed at the 50th percentile on a given assessment, those learning in-person would be performing at the 69th percentile.

Researchers Gabrielle Strouse of the University of South Dakota and Jennifer Samson of Queens University of Charlotte analyzed the effects of video lessons on children ages 6 and younger across nearly 60 studies (though it did not look specifically at differences by children’s gender, race, or socio-economic backgrounds).

While there has long been evidence that young children do not learn as much from video as face-to-face instruction, some research has suggested only infants and toddlers show a significant deficit from video. The researchers found that while the video-learning deficit did shrink by about half for children over age 3, it remained significant, at about a quarter of a standard deviation learning loss for preschool-to-1st grade children.

Strouse noted that there has been less research specifically on the effects of video instruction among preschool-through-grade 1 children—something likely to change as thousands of schools across the country are forced to grapple with remote learning in early grades.

“I think that there are some things like working memory skills, that play a role in how we take in and process and use information, and those things develop with age. And we also get better at dealing with learning obstacles,” Strouse said. “But there are also some conceptual obstacles in learning something in video and understanding how that transfers to the real world.”

Some separate studies have suggested that children who see themselves interacting on a video may be better able to transfer what they learn on video to real life. But Strouse and Samson found children showed just as much of a learning gap from using live and pre-recorded video. And this and other studies also suggest that young and even older students and adults may interpret online learning tasks as “easier” than the same lessons in person and can tend to dedicate less effort to them.

“Early studies tended to have a one-way [video] feed, and they didn’t have back-and-forth communication between both parties; the person was demonstrating something that would...
be recorded and delivered to the child in real time, but they did not necessarily look for what the child was doing or making feedback,” Strouse said. “So it’s really, really different from the type of Skype and other video stuff that we have today. But we found that [modern interactive] video did not decrease the size of the deficit. ... I think that the jury is still out on video chat.”

There may be ways teachers can boost the effectiveness of video instruction, however. A separate 2016 study of slightly older students, ages 7 to 10, found that students learned significantly more from speech and language instruction when it was accompanied by gestures—and the benefit was significantly stronger for teachers on video than live. However, the study found no effect from using gestures in math instruction.

Separate guidelines developed by Kathy Hirsh-Pasek, the director of the Infant Language laboratory at Temple University, and Jennifer Zosh, the director of the Brandywine Child Development Lab at Penn State University-Brandywine, recommend that for digital-based lessons and programs, educators should focus on “E-AIMS, or content that is:

- Engaging, which includes both interesting children in the material but also reducing distractions, such as excessive links or buttons on a screen that can capture a child’s attention.

- Actively involves the child, in ways that are challenging enough that the child has to think and puzzle through questions or tasks;

- Is meaningful, such as lessons that incorporate stories, familiar characters and activities from the child’s daily life; and

- Social, incorporating time for the child to interact with peers and the teacher.

“Sometimes research on video deficits gets misinterpreted as saying young kids can’t learn from video, and that’s not the case,” Strouse said. “It’s just that they don’t learn as efficiently; maybe they will need more repetition or more practice in order to be able to overcome that difference. ... And at least for young children, having someone in the room with them who supports them, like a parent who helps them while learning via video, can make a big difference.”

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Teaching Kids How to Read During COVID-19: A Big Remote Learning Challenge

How to Teach Reading With a Digital Mindset: Researcher Nell Duke’s Advice

By Mark Lieberman

School building closures during the COVID-19 pandemic have hit younger students particularly hard. One of the key functions of schools for early-age students is laying the foundation for the basic reading skills that will be essential for the rest of their lives.

Millions of students across the country are continuing to learn at home as the 2020-21 school year begins. That means educators need new tools to keep reading instruction consistent and new philosophies for engaging students at a distance.

Nell Duke, a professor of literacy, language, and culture at the University of Michigan School of Education, has been examining the literature and developing new instructional practices to meet the ever-shifting challenges of the pandemic and its effect on schools. Education Week asked her how teachers should adjust their practices and recalibrate their priorities to ensure students are gaining fundamental reading skills.

What are the biggest difficulties teaching reading with digital tools?

In an asynchronous context, the problem is that there’s not a direct teacher presence. The teacher presence can only be through artifacts: a worksheet, a set of instructions, a set of books the teacher leads, a video the child can access through community television. The research we have shows what makes a substantial difference in children’s literacy development almost always is teacher-mediated: The teacher making a certain instructional move, or coaching in a certain way. We just don’t know how to move the needle substantially for children in early literacy without direct contact and interaction.

A number of PBS kids television programs have been tested in research and have been shown to foster children’s development. Some computer programs and devices are designed to be able to be used offline, like OneTab from Open Up Resources. They seem to be able to help kids get a little bit better at certain foundational literacy skills tasks. But they don’t get kids to the point where they’re meeting grade-level standards in literacy from working on those devices.

The synchronous context, I have a lot more optimism about. There are a lot of research-tested instructional techniques that can be used through videoconferencing. They need to be modified somewhat to make sense for that context, but versions of them are similar enough that they would still work. You can still do phonics instruction by videoconference. You can still listen to children read and use information from that to plan future instruction. You can still read to them and do an interactive read-aloud. It’s a little more awkward, it’s
a little clunkier [than in-person instruction].

Will it be possible for teachers to mitigate that awkwardness and clunkiness?

No matter how hard we try, no matter how much we plan, there's no way that teaching online via videoconference is going to be the same as teaching in the classroom. I think that shifting that mindset's really helpful because we're not constantly disappointing ourselves.

The key is to not take a deficit perspective on remote teaching. It's probably not healthy, and it's certainly not productive, to constantly focus on what these remote teaching contexts can’t do.

An analogy that I think might be helpful is keeping in touch with our aunt who lives across the country. We can think about FaceTiming with our aunt: I can see how she's feeling, I can see her smile. But there are also some constraints. The line may be choppier. I may see that she has a sink full of dishes and feel bad that I'm not there to help her. Different media are going to afford us some things and they're going to have some limitations. That's the mindset we want to bring to teaching remotely.

With phonological awareness instruction, it can be difficult to hear children's articulation, which really matters. But what are the affordances? Every child can type a response in the chat box, and then I'm hearing from every single child, and I'm seeing their response associated with their name. You can download some videoconference platforms that automatically transcribe the chat, so you can look back and use that as an assessment tool. In just that one case, we see a downside, but we also see some opportunities or affordances.

What will teachers need to unlearn to shift to a digital mindset?

Education tends to have a strong book bias. Depending on the circumstances in a remote context, it may be difficult to get books to kids and get them back from kids. It’s almost impossible for the teacher to ensure that every kid has a copy of the books that they’re reading or teaching from. The way to approach that is to broaden our idea about what constitutes a text that would be valuable for young children: online magazines and websites; having students write themselves and read each other’s texts; even texts that teachers write themselves. I know that sounds like a lot of work, but sometimes it can be faster to write a text ourselves than it is to find exactly the right text for our teaching point. There are of course online books from sites like textproject.org, too.

The absolute No. 1 effective remote teaching strategy would be “interaction.” What a lot of very
Want Social Justice? CLOSE THE ACHIEVEMENT GAP. NOW!

INEQUITY ISN’T JUST A HEADLINE

It’s a reality our Black and Hispanic children face every day, from coast to coast. In January, North Carolina, Superior Court Judge David Lee concluded the state had not ensured the provision of education meeting required constitutional standards, leaving “too many” students behind. A month later, California students and teachers sued their state, winning a $53 million-dollar settlement for not preparing kids to read.

FROM COAST TO COAST, IT’S HAPPENING EVERYWHERE

In LA schools 90% of students qualify for free or reduced-price lunch — a poverty indicator. 7 out of 10 third-graders do not meet California’s Common Core standards. It’s so bad, David Moch, one of the LA plaintiffs, used kindergarten reading tools to help children as high as fifth grade. Meanwhile, Judge Lee says, “North Carolina’s PreK-12 public education system leaves too many students behind — especially students of color and economically disadvantaged students.”

52% of our Black children scored BELOW basic

The Nation’s Report Card states nearly 2/3 of American kids lack fundamental reading skills

In 2019 only 37% of 12th graders were proficient in reading

45% of our Hispanic children scored BELOW basic

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We have a proven track-record in schools with diverse student populations. "In fact, high-need students in a recent Learning Ovations cohort were, on average, 2.6 times more likely to read at proficient levels compared to prior cohorts," said Henry May, Ph.D., Director of the Center for Research in Education & Social Policy (CRESP).

This snapshot is expanded to include 15 schools, possessing 90%+ Hispanic students, 50% were reading at grade-level by first grade’s end. After just 1 year!

Learning Ovations offers a wonderful partnership, guiding the Science of Reading into district implementation and outcome delivery.

-Dr. Louisa Moats, Author of LETRS

Also, these students are closing the gap - averaging 15 months of growth during just 9 months of instruction. In fact, at some schools the outcomes are more than double their previous levels.

Katie Hernandez, a Curriculum Specialist from Anaheim Elementary School District in Anaheim, California says: “Teachers and school leaders quickly realize the value of an evidence-based program that uses frequent assessment to both build instructional grouping and lesson plans while facilitating changes in grouping as students’ needs change.”

The need is greater than ever to support our underrepresented students.

-Jo Welter, Former Superintendent - Ambridge Area School District, PA

WE CANNOT CONTINUE TO RELY ON "STRATEGIES" THAT DON’T WORK.

According to Jo Welter, Former Superintendent for Ambridge Area School District, "Before the COVID-19 pandemic, there were already big challenges with getting K-3 students reading proficiently. The need is greater than ever to support our underrepresented students, provide opportunities for their success and ensure a better future for us all.”

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When considered in the context of the cumulative effect of A2i, there is higher-student performance for all children to be at, or above grade-level as they receive two more years of A2i-based instruction.

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OUR PROMISE: WE WILL NOT FAIL YOUR STUDENTS

A2i has been a match made in heaven. A2i means too Amazing 2 Imagine!

-Jorge Ventura, Principal from School 29, Paterson School District, Paterson, New Jersey

THE PROOF IS IN THE RESEARCH

Dr. Carol Connor, the lead researcher whose work proved instrumental in the A2i breakthrough understood there will always be external factors impinging on a child’s ability to achieve reading outcomes: poverty, book availability, homelessness, Internet access, broken homes, mobility, fear, and two-career families.

And yet her research focused on what schools can do once a child walks through the kindergarten door. Yes, COVID-19 is the latest in a long journey of environmental slights preventing children from reading at grade level. But it’s a challenge we can solve together.

Irrespective of all environmental factors, our 15 years of work in this space and our remarkable outcomes show we can achieve over 90% of children reading at, or above, grade level by third grade’s end. Responding to COVID-19 is no different. We’ve brought children with below grade-level language skills up to, and beyond, grade level. We’ve dramatically reduced the need for interventions.

Dr. Carol Connor
Principal Researcher and Creator of A2i

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A FINAL WORD FROM OUR FOUNDER/CEO

Urgency is needed to transform outcomes using tools like A2i. But this is not just an academic issue. It’s an equity issue. An issue of justice. It goes to the heart of what it means to be an American. Educators must put their foot down. We cannot wait decades for school systems to catch up with current science. To do so would be to doom more generations. We must refuse the status quo. Our ability to function as a nation, not to mention, thrive, depends on a literate populace. Once we agree nothing else is acceptable we will enact full transformational growth. The time to change is now. Our children depend on us.

- Jay Connor, Founder/CEO

As Seen In:

The Pennsylvania Administrator, News 12, New York, News in Charlotte, IES, ASCD Education Update, Orange County Business Journal, Literacy Leaders Summit - Keynote for Equity and Leadership
well-intentioned people have done is to record read-aloud books for kids. But the problem is much of the value educationally in read-alouds lies in the interaction around the book, not in the book itself. Reading a book straight through for kids is not actually getting us what we need educationally. We don’t have the physical tool of our body to help keep kids engaged, so we even more so need that interaction around the text.

The pandemic has undoubtedly exacerbated inequities for public school students. How can teachers make sure remote learning is working for all students?

Getting information about technological resources and context at home is really important. How often does the internet work? What kind of internet do you have? How many people in the home will be on the internet at the same time? Who might be in the same room with your child when your child is engaged in school learning? Getting that information upfront can be really helpful so the teacher can plan accordingly. A follow-up phone call with a child whose internet dropped to hear what that child had to say about the book that they were reading—a little opportunity for instruction with that child—could be a workaround as well.

What should educators prioritize given the time constraints of remote learning?

All of these benchmarks in literacy are socially constructed. The way we decide what constitutes 3rd grade reading is some combination of community members and teachers at the state level get together with a bunch of test items and decide what percentage of those test items kids should get right at that age. It would be perfectly legitimate for our society [during COVID-19] to decide that we have a different set of standards, [and] we’re going to focus on moving every kid forward, but we’re not going to focus on getting every kid to the socially constructed benchmark that we decided on pre-pandemic. All aspects of literacy development are important. It’s definitely important for people to continue to read words and spell words. But it’s also really important for kids to continue to develop in their content knowledge—math and science and social studies, which research finds is actually highly related to children’s long-term reading success.  

Compared to teaching students to read in person with print materials, teaching students to read with remote instruction and digital materials is:

- Much less challenging: 1%
- Somewhat less challenging: 0%
- About the same level of challenge: 8%
- Somewhat more challenging: 32%
- Much more challenging: 59%

*Results show responses from teachers, principals and district leaders who reported involvement with early reading instruction.

SOURCE: EdWeek Research Center

Preschoolers Who Practice Phonics Show Stronger Math Skills, Study Finds

By Sarah Schwartz

Young children who spend more time learning about the relationship between letters and sounds are better at counting, calculating, and recognizing numbers, a new study has found.

Researchers from Liverpool John Moores University in England looked at the reading and math learning experiences that young children have at home with parents. They asked the parents of 274 preschoolers—children who were on average about 4 years old—how often they did different educational activities with their kids.

These activities were split into three categories: code-focused literacy experiences (including singing songs about letters or the alphabet, or teaching kids how to sound out words), meaning-focused literacy experiences (such as discussing the plot of stories or describing pictures), and number experiences (like discussing quantities of things, or pointing out numbers in books or the environment). The researchers also measured parents’ attitudes about math.

At the end of their last year of preschool, researchers tested students’ early number skills. Among all of the factors researchers asked parents about, only practice with letter-sound interactions positively predicted children’s ability to count, calculate, and recognize numbers, when controlling for other factors including socioeconomic status. Number experiences didn’t predict this variance. And other code-focused literacy activities that didn’t focus on letter sounds—for example, reciting the alphabet—also didn’t have the same effect.

Why does learning about the sounds that letters have anything to do with math skills? Some of the relationship can be explained by language ability, said Fiona Simmons, a senior lecturer in the school of Natural Sciences and Psychology at Liverpool John Moores University, and one of the authors of the study.

“Some aspects of [number skills], like your ability to read and recognize numerals, we’d
imagine ... to be reliant to some extent on your vocabulary abilities,” said Simmons. But in the researchers’ statistical models, language ability didn’t account for the entire effect.

One possible explanation, said Simmons, is that learning letter-sound interactions gives children the tools to understand abstract symbolic systems—the idea that a printed symbol on a page can stand for something else. If children can understand this concept as it applies to letters and reading, it might be easier for them to apply it to numbers and math.

These findings add more support to the research base that suggests there are benefits to talking with young children about the sounds within words, said Simmons.

“Any activities that early years professionals or teachers of younger children can do to give parents the confidence to engage in these types of informal conversations about letters and sounds ... would be beneficial,” she said.

—Getty

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Teaching Reading During COVID-19: Frustrated Students, Tech Challenges

By Alyson Klein

Claudia Margaroli teaches 1st grade English, reading, and social studies to a mix of English-language learners and native speakers at Charlotte East Language Academy, a public bilingual school in Charlotte, N.C. In a typical school year, she will have one group of students one day, and another the next.

But this is not a typical school year. All of Margaroli’s classes have moved online, due to COVID-19. Education Week talked to Margaroli about what it is like to teach reading to early-elementary students in a virtual environment.

How have you adjusted your teaching to a digital environment?

“Every day, we start with a morning meeting” to encourage social and emotional learning, Margaroli said. But she acknowledges that the morning meetings are “a little difficult through a screen. It is a lot of clicking. It’s on an iPad. There’s a lot of [tech access] issues.” And she wonders whether parents are giving their children a hand.

“If parents are helping, is that work authentic?”

Only about half of her students complete the assignments she gives them outside of class, so she doesn’t rely on those assignments to inform her lesson planning.

What is it like working with English-language learners in a digital environment?

Margaroli said her English-language learners are more frustrated than usual. “There’s this feeling of being rushed and that when you’re rushed you tend to speak quickly,” and may not get all the words or sounds correct, Margaroli said. That can lead to hurt feelings. “It’s hard when you are virtual, and I see a child upset with their microphone off. They have to choose to ask me for help.” She has reminded children that they need to let her know if they are struggling, telling her students: “I do not expect perfection.”

What’s your biggest worry about kids learning to read in remote learning environments?

“I’m a young teacher so you’d think I’d be more into tech,” Margaroli said. But she wants her students to have experience with tangible books. “I still deeply believe that children need books in their hands every day, multiple times a
day, and that has been a gap or deficiency” of online learning.

**What has been the impact of online teaching on grouping?**

“In person, I have the flexibility to change my leveled groups on a whim whenever I want,” said Margaroli. She’d move a student if they gained a particular skill or seemed not to be grasping a concept. But now, it’s harder to make those shifts. “Every time I change groups virtually that means sending out a new schedule and a link,” she explained.

So, she said, “I’m becoming a bigger risk-taker with the groups.” If Margaroli feels students will move on to the next challenge even if that was not her original plan. “I feel like there’s a lot of trust with the kids and me. We are risk-takers and we’re flexible and we’re all in this together.”

**Do you feel like your students are mastering the material?**

“I think the reading foundational skills” are developing nicely, said Margaroli, whose students returned to school in mid-August. The majority of my kids knew very, very few letter sounds [at the beginning of the year] and are almost at 100 percent at letter sounds [now]. Phonics. Decoding. Spelling. I feel like my kids are learning at the exact same pace we would in a classroom.”

But she’s less sure about writing. “I have found it hard with my [computer] camera to model a writing piece… It’s not an authentic writing experience. I can’t see what they are writing unless they hold it up themselves.”

**Has there been anything positive about teaching during COVID-19?**

“I have really loved the online resources with phonics.”

**Any other advice for teachers who are struggling with teaching reading during COVID-19?**

“I feel like it’s so important for teachers, even if you are only having five kids log on, to not become complacent. Just like in the classroom where we say every kid can learn, we need to remember that every single child can learn virtually, too.”

**Four Strategies for Getting the First 10 Years of a Child’s Life Right**

How to bridge the gap between early childhood, elementary school, and health and social services

By David Jacobson

Two divides thwart the best efforts of American educators to improve outcomes for low-income children and their families. The first is the gap between early-childhood and K-12 education. The second is between K-12 education and health and social services. Typically these institutions operate in silos. Yet decades of research confirm that to best learn and thrive, children need early-childhood and elementary education to be aligned so that each year builds upon the last, and they need health and social services to be coordinated to maximize their positive impact.

Over the past decade, I’ve had the opportunity to research and work with communities that are attempting to bridge these divides. I recently completed a two-year study, funded by the Heising-Simons Foundation, of school and community partnerships across the country that are at the forefront of building more coherent and integrated local systems of care and learning. I visited these communities and interviewed superintendents, principals, preschool directors, community leaders, and many preschool and elementary school teachers. Despite working independently, these communities have diagnosed similar challenges to improving supports for children and families. In response, they are converging on a common set of innovative structures and strategies.

These partnerships are motivated by a commitment to educational equity and the goal that all children learn and thrive. They are focused on improving children’s experiences during the first decade of their lives, and thus I refer to them as “First 10” schools and communities. In some cases, First 10 partnerships encompass an entire district or a large zone within a district and support all the elementary schools, Head Start programs, community-based preschools, and child- and family-serving organizations within
this geographic area. In others, a single elementary school will serve as a hub to provide resources to children ages 0-4 and their families, while also collaborating with nearby early-childhood programs. Either way, successful First 10 schools and communities take four important steps in their efforts to improve outcomes for children and families that together provide a roadmap for other communities:

1. Support professional collaboration to improve teaching and learning. The first role of First 10 schools and communities is to bring educators together for professional learning. The city of Normal, Ill., for example, began with joint professional development for kindergarten and prekindergarten teachers, which led to cross-grade classroom visits and ultimately reciprocal improvements in each grade. The prekindergarten teachers deepened their efforts on concept development and developed longer thematic investigations while kindergarten teachers piloted a daily block of structured play. Cambridge, Mass., which is home both to well-known universities and to a large low-income population, has developed a comprehensive quality-improvement initiative in which groups of community-based preschools and groups of family childcare providers form communities of practice that are supported with mentoring, coaching, and professional development.

2. Coordinate comprehensive services. In addition to improving the quality of children’s learning experiences, First 10 schools and communities create systems and processes to better coordinate health and social services. In Cincinnati; Multnomah County, Ore., and the metro area of Omaha, Neb., for instance, elementary schools deploy early-childhood coordinators to engage and support families years before their children enter kindergarten. Often these coordinators facilitate play-and-learn groups for parents and children and connect families to health and social services, all the while building relationships and trust. Communities also work to improve resource and referral and case-management systems and to coordinate home-visiting programs to ensure the greatest impact for those most in need.

3. Promote culturally responsive partnerships with families. First 10 initiatives deepen family engagement by creating structures and opportunities for family leadership and input, which in turn help to ensure that these initiatives are responsive to the needs and priorities of different cultural groups. In a pilot project in 10 schools in Multnomah County, families play an active role in designing weekly school-based play and learn groups, half of which are carried out in languages other than English or are created for culturally specific groups. The county has also cultivated a network of community agencies with deep cultural and linguistic expertise to engage and support families in the area.

4. Provide strategic leadership and ongoing assessment. First 10 schools and communities are new cross-sectoral arrangements that require new leadership structures to implement strategies effectively. For example, Cambridge’s community-wide partnership is overseen by a steering committee and three subcommittees on access and quality, health, and family engagement and partnership. First 10 initiatives also organize and communicate their work through focused implementation plans and projected outcome indicators, which they use to monitor progress and adjust strategies to achieve their goals.

These comprehensive First 10 approaches require a fundamental shift in thinking. This new mindset begins by thinking of the first 10 years as a continuum of high-quality experiences that should be coordinated, aligned, and focused on equity. As they translate this shift into action, leaders restructure and reconceptualize the relationships among elementary schools, early-childhood programs, community agencies, and families with young children.

Bringing First 10 schools and communities to scale will require building on the work of leading-edge communities in an ongoing process of adaptation, innovation, assessment, and continuous improvement. Many First 10 communities are beginning to learn from each other in an informal community of practice. States and national funders can support this work by developing grant programs, providing technical assistance, and sponsoring learning networks to encourage exchange. These investments have great potential as First 10 schools and communities are among the most powerful strategies we have to bridge vexing divides, address yawning achievement gaps, ensure educational equity, and raise achievement for low-income children.

David Jacobson is a principal technical adviser at Education Development Center in Boston and the author of the 2019 report “All Children Learn and Thrive: Building First 10 Schools and Communities.”

OPINION

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How to Really Close Opportunity Gaps During Our National Racial Reckoning

The case for opportunity-centered teaching

By H. Richard Milner IV

The Black Lives Matter movement strengthened dramatically this year, as millions of Americans took to the streets to protest police violence. Schools have an opportunity to use this momentum and movement to reimagine their curriculum and teaching. Rather than returning to normalcy after the COVID-19 pandemic—to stale, dated, predetermined, irrelevant, under-responsive, disconnected, and “racially neutral” curriculum and instructional practices that maintain a white-centric status quo—teachers have a renewed chance instead to address opportunity gaps in education.

During almost 20 years of research in schools
and working with teachers, I have found that teachers’ mindsets can have a profound impact on gaps of opportunity. When teachers adopt a “colorblind” mindset to their work—where their curriculum, instructional, relational, and assessment practices do not acknowledge, honor, and build on students’ racial identity—they create gaps in opportunity. Moreover, when “colorblindness” guides educational practice, teachers do not recognize systemic and institutional patterns, such as a disproportionate number of Black students who are suspended and expelled or referred to special education.

Opportunity gaps also increase when teachers do not recognize when their own culture and cultural practices conflict with the cultures of their students, families, and communities. Teachers who believe that they have rightfully earned their privileges through merit because they have worked hard, followed the law, or have skill and ability often do not recognize how those pathways to privilege are not available to everyone.

Opportunity gaps also intensify when teachers have deficit mindsets and low expectations of students of a particular race or background. These deficit mindsets show up in conversations teachers have with colleagues about students and families, their reading of students’ school records, and their generalized, misinformed stereotypes of particular students, especially Black and brown students. When teachers adopt context-neutral mindsets, they have a difficult time understanding why they need to study the spaces, places, and overall environments of students and their families. Opportunity gaps increase when teachers consider themselves the only—or the main—arbiters of knowledge and knowing, ignoring the enormous range of expertise, insights, and brilliance in local and broader contexts.

I have found that “opportunity-centered teaching” can address and disrupt aforementioned opportunity gaps and simultaneously build curriculum and instructional practices that advance a national push for racial reckoning. This approach places opportunity at the core of a classroom where teachers, students, parents, families, and communities recognize students’ diverse and dynamic assets. This involves designing instructional practices to hook students into content that connects with core aspects of their identities, such as their race, gender, and language.

What do teachers need to know and do to construct these practices in this race-reckoning movement in society? I have identified five interconnected imperatives for this work: Focus on building and sustaining relationships with students and families. Use community knowledge to inform practice. Protect the psychological and mental health of both students and teachers. Confront how racist, sexist, homophobic, xenophobic, and other beliefs inform our decisions. And, finally, prioritize curriculum and instructional convergence.

For the curriculum to converge with student experiences, teachers should focus on the “so what?” of learning opportunities.

For the curriculum to converge with student experiences, teachers should focus on the “so what?” of learning opportunities just as they are concerned with what and how they teach. I have found that young people, and Black students in particular, spend too many hours in classrooms disconnected from anything that meaningfully resonates or connects with them. Curriculum convergence merges the who (student identity), the what (community and society as texts), and the where (inside and outside of school engagement of young people).

Teachers must help young people imagine how what they are learning might be a tool for something greater than themselves, and a race reckoning to improve the overall human condition is a fertile opportunity. When students can apply what they are learning for the greater good, social action and activism become an important form of curriculum and instruction.

Teachers should find ways to center questions of race, racism, and inequality in the curriculum. Discuss, for instance, the alarming and disproportionate number of deaths of Black and brown people from COVID-19. Talk openly about the police shootings of Black people, including Breonna Taylor, George Floyd, Rekia Boyd, and Antwon Rose Jr. Study the ongoing national immigration debates over children being taken from their families and placed in fenced cages, hundreds of whom still remain separated from their parents today. Research the long-running water crisis in Flint, Mich., as well as the many other crises of environmental justice across the United States and beyond.

This sort of curriculum and instructional convergence allows young people to think about themselves, their own families, and social injustices. This ultimately helps them to build their own positions on the need for and their participation in the racial reckoning our country is facing—and hopefully realizing and actualizing.

Curriculum and instruction can converge as opportunities for students to learn by bridging student identity, their practices, and engagement inside school with those outside of school, including their community experiences, insights, understandings, and realities. In other words, student identities and society must be considered curricular resources, centering students’ opportunities to learn. Their practices and interests become part of the curriculum that can be used as tools for social change.

There has never been a better time for opportunity-centered teaching that supports young people to build knowledge to improve racial relations and concurrently the human condition.

H. Richard Milner IV is the Cornelius Vanderbilt Chair of Education at Peabody College, Vanderbilt University. He is the author of several books, including Start Where You Are, But Don’t Stay There (2020) and These Kids Are Out of Control (2018).
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