

An Analysis of Virtual Learning; The Decreased Literary Abilities of Students Across America

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January 20th 2020 marks the first confirmed case of the COVID-19 virus in America, an event that led to the eventual historic closing of schools across America in late March and early April of 2020. This sent many schools to online schooling, via Zoom or other video conferencing websites for at least six months. With learning never having taken place this way on such a large scale, this was a new, unresearched form of teaching and learning for both students and teachers. With so much continuous research into the elements that make a classroom and educator effective at having students learn, virtual learning was truly a “shot in the dark” as to how students were actually learning. Now with virtual learning having been used for over a year, research has finally started/ been analyzed to discover just how possibly detrimental virtual learning could be. Much of schooling, especially for younger students, focuses on acquiring literary abilities and developing language as this is the age range where the brain is most attuned for language development. It was soon seen that students who participated in virtual learning were becoming delayed in their literary abilities, compared to the standards that have been set for their age groups. Much of the learning materials physically provided by teachers were now the responsibilities of parents, many of which that do not know how to teach and were also working online at the time. Students with special needs were put at an incredible disadvantage as parents lacked the professional resources to accommodate their child’s learning needs. Tasks such as read-alouds and popcorn readings became increasingly difficult to incorporate into lessons due to the delays that virtual classrooms provided both visually and auditorily. This lack of physical teachers forced children of all ages to self-regulate their learning which to students was an imaginary concept their entire educational careers, so many had a difficult time adjusting. Virtual learning influenced a drastic decline in students’ literary abilities due to its lack of

socialization, accommodation, and total reliance on student abilities to self-regulate their learning.

Analysis

Student Socialization

While socialization is not the main goal of schooling, it is an integral part of physical schooling, as it is the way in which students learn to behave, read their environment, and ultimately develop language skills. This is especially important for younger students as their socialization with teachers is a primary factor in their development of these skills simply through mirroring their teacher. The Starpoint School, located in Fort Worth Texas, is a special education school that's curriculum focuses on literacy acquisition for students with learning disabilities such as dyslexia. In a discussion about their observations of students during the sudden shift to online learning, educators of the school agreed that, “ students sheltered at home had increased need for social engagement with peers” (Chamberlain et al., 2020). Another analysis of a special needs elementary classroom explains in a discussion of effective classroom setups, “research shows that the presence of shadow teachers who help the main teacher in the classroom, parental involvement, social interaction and support from all schools are the main keys to the success of inclusive education” (Asri et al., 2021) explaining that even socialization influenced by educators in the classroom is an integral part of effective instruction, especially when discussing literacy development as there a multitude of reading activities that students can complete to build their reading comprehension and literacy skills where socialization with peers is necessary. An example of reading tasks where socialization is necessary involved are “Readers Theater” tasks where students are tasked with collaboratively preparing a script and reading it paying close attention to tone to help build both their listening comprehension and reading comprehension

skills. While this task seems achievable over virtual learning, as students are still able to work with each other collaboratively, it could be less effective due to the lack of an appropriate learning environment, possibly faulty equipment students own, or lack of physical teacher to help ensure that the student socialization in class is lesson focused, as previously explained by Asri, as virtual learning only allows teachers to manage students in small groups one at a time (Young, 2012). Tasks such as these prove the importance of in-person socialization for effective literacy instruction, that virtual learning is unable to provide.

Student Accommodation

With the sudden change to online learning, educators were struggling to provide proper accommodations to students without learning disabilities, due to a lack of general educational resources to provide each student within their own homes. For those with learning disabilities, whose accommodations were not computer-centric, students were sent home without the proper resources needed for schooling as outlined in their IEP or 404 plans and were now learning in environments that lacked the professional accommodations developed to help further their learning. While many parents are involved in the formation of their child's IEP or 404 plans so that they know their child's accommodations to observe that their school is meeting their child's needs, many parents lack the proper tools used by schools and educators to effectively instruct their students with learning disabilities. The article *Early Reading Learning for Special Needs Students: Challenges on Inclusive Primary School During COVID-19 Pandemic* provides many examples of this lack of at-home accommodations as it illustrates, “ s. Each student with special needs has different obstacles, while only a few teachers understand these barriers. For example, during the early reading learning in school, the material is given through drilling which is not being applied at home as parents did not care and had no contribution to their children's

studies...In the interview, the informant stated that he had not been able to do early reading lessons remotely because of equipment constraints.” (Asri et al., 2021). Asri explains early reading lessons to be lessons given to children with learning disabilities to help establish their difficulties with reading to create the appropriate accommodations and student focuses within the classroom. This form of assessment is crucial to have the proper equipment to help develop the specialized literacy education of a child with learning disabilities so a lack of this equipment would lead to a less effective style for teaching, leading to lower literacy rates amongst students with learning disabilities.

Self Regulation

With the lack of physical teachers in students’ lives during the lockdown, many students were forced to turn to their parents for their educational needs. It has been observed that “Parent involvement, the instructor’s expectations, and effective course design are also important indicators to a student’s success with virtual classes. Students’ virtual learning process is more likely to be positive when parents are actively involved with their virtual education.” (Simonson et al., 2012). It is important to highlight that these observations were made at the very beginning of virtual learning in 2012, almost 10 years ago but is ultimately proven to still be correct through virtual learning in 2020. As mentioned previously simply reading to their younger children every night did not completely solve the child’s loss of literacy skills however this parent involvement did help buffer some of that loss. Unfortunately due to their own lack of education, work schedule, or simply lack of interest, many parents were unable to provide this engagement for their children, forcing kids to self-regulate their learning. While this may sound beneficial to the students as it helps build their independence, this was incredibly damaging as younger students were simply too young to understand how to self regulate their education as

they were relatively new to schooling, and older students were never taught to self regulate their learning as they sat through these structured learning environments for most of their lives. While it could be argued that students are able to learn this form of self-regulation during this online process, this is an incredibly difficult process to do without proper instruction, and nearly impossible for kids of younger age groups or with learning disabilities. It is incredibly important to realize that the transfer to online schooling only took place in an average of 7 days, with a heavy focus on how to simply use online platforms to teach rather than teaching using online platforms, so there was no attention drawn towards kids needing to and self-regulating their learning until the damage to their education had already been done.

Literacy Loss in America

With the lack of socialization, accommodations, and physical instructor needed to create an effective classroom environment to build literacy skills in students, students across America were beginning to show a delay in their literary abilities. A study conducted in the Summer of 2020 predicted that kindergarten students' reading ability alone would, "decrease 66% (2.46 vs. 7.17 points/100 days), compared to the business-as-usual scenario, resulting in a 31% less reading ability gain from 1 January 2020 to 1 September 2020" (Bao et al., 2020 Modeling Reading Ability). A similar study conducted on an older age group states that, "3rd-7th grade students will loss approximately 35% of reading learning gains compared to what they would have had gained in a typical school year" (Bao et al., 2020 Literacy Loss in Kindergarten Children). Both of these studies are compared to students' typical reading loss, with this loss typically being caused by the large summer break and lack of practice at home. Bao's work explains that a way to lessen this loss of reading and language ability during the summertime was to enroll students in summer reading intensives, but those were closed along with public schools

during the COVID-19 lockdown. Bao further explains that this task of maintaining and teaching children was then given completely to the parents, many of which were full time parenting for the first time which was a task unto itself, furthering a child's loss of reading as parents prioritized the physical and mental health and needs of their child before their educational needs. Bao's studies also illustrate that even being read to every day by the parents does not save a child from this drastic loss of reading ability as it shows, "that kindergarten children who have books read to them daily would have 2.3 points less loss (42%) compared to those who do not, who are predicted to have a 5.6-point loss during the same time period." showing that while reading read to does help the rate at which children lost reading abilities during the lockdown, they were still losing a significant amount of progress over an extended period of time.

Discussion

Due to the numerous faults in virtual learning, students across America have been experiencing an increased loss in their literary abilities. Factors such as low student socialization, both lesson-focused and noneducational, lack of professional accommodations, and lack of parent involvement greatly contributed to this loss of literacy. Literary skills are crucial for the educational development of younger children, as schooling quickly transitions from learning how to read, which is greatly emphasized in the curriculums of all elementary school subjects, to learning from reading. With literacy development being delayed in this way for almost 2 years, depending on the region in which a student lives in, it is crucial for curriculum makers to examine their school's curriculum, and essentially change it to help this generation of students "catch up" with their reading abilities so that these issues can be corrected while it is easiest for the child to absorb language skills, rather than later in their lifetime when the acquisition of these skills becomes difficult due to their physical and mental development. While many schools have

returned to in-person classes, many educators have found possible solutions to the issues that they were experiencing while teaching literacy skills to their younger students, should schools return to virtual learning due to other strains of the virus or other emergency reasons.

Possible Solutions

While the factors above are the newly researched primary causes for the loss of literary abilities in American students, educators have already found numerous ways in which to change their virtual lessons. For schools that have chosen to remain online, such as the StarPoint school previously discussed, a solution that has been created has been to simply have more teacher/parent engagement through the use of weekly parent-teacher virtual conferences (Chamberlain et al., 2020) that focus less on a child's grades and behaviors like a typical conference would, but instead focuses on how parents can help build a child's literary abilities at home by discussing the classroom worksheets, the language that can be used in their homes, and simply how to read to their children on a daily basis to help lessen the delay that virtual learning has caused many students to have. The StarPoint school also helps with student socialization by hosting "zoom lunches" to help students socialize with one another in an unregulated way, as they would in physical school. While this was not the monitored socialization that directly helped students' abilities to read, it did help raise student morale, leaving them to be more motivated to learn new literacy skills. Some educators have also begun to use programs, such as SeeSaw (a digital classroom platform that utilizes portfolio making for student work/notes), that act as class worksheets, that help highlight vocabulary, and are easily accessible to students should they have a computer (Chamberlain et al., 2020). While these solutions do provide a solution to more students than simply teaching as normal through a computer has, there are still

many students that would require further accommodation for effective literacy instruction through virtual platforms.

Conclusions

The significantly lowered literacy rates across American students can be attributed to virtual learning as it did not provide the socialization, accommodations, or physical instructors necessary to provide effective literacy instruction amongst young students. Guided socialization in the form of group reading projects, such as “Readers theater” helps emphasize the impact of student socialization on a child’s abilities to read and speak the English language. Professional accommodations are absolutely necessary to effectively instruct students with learning disabilities, such as dyslexia, and the equipment necessary to provide these accommodations to students was unavailable to provide during the pandemic, making virtual learning less effective for those who require accommodations to learn. With lack of physical teaching present in the students’ lessons, and parents having their own work to attend to, not knowing how to help their child, or simply not being interested in their child’s education, younger students were forced to rely on their own self-regulation to effectively learn in a virtual environment. With parent involvement being observed to be essential for virtual learning to be effective amongst younger students, even with reading to their children to slightly decrease this loss of literary ability, children who were forced to self regulate their learning due to lack of parental presence in their education were simply unable to properly learn literacy skills as they would in a physical classroom setting. Due to these factors, it has been observed that child literacy rates would decline by 66% which is almost double the typical loss due to summer vacation & other factors in normal learning environments, which is 31%. Literacy skills are crucial for a child to develop, not only because it impacts their linguistic abilities, but it is the focus of their learning,

as school goals shift from learning to read in elementary school, to reading to learn in secondary schools. Due to this delay in literacy skills present amongst students who participated in virtual learning, it is crucial for schools to update their curriculum, to help students regain the literacy skills appropriate for their grade level so that they can progress through school at a normal pace. While virtual educators have found numerous programs to more effectively engage their students, further research needs to be conducted to see which programs and virtual accommodations could be used to provide the most effective virtual learning experience should schools find the need to return online for an extended period of time once again, to prevent this delay in students reading abilities for future generations of students.

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