

Disparities in Distance Learning Equality

E-Portfolio: Disparities in Distance Learning Equality

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Abstract

This assignment required that I research learning inequality within the United States, with an emphasis on online learning. There are not many resources available through the UCCS library database pertaining to the switch to online learning as a result of the Covid-19 crisis, which presented a major challenge in my research. I analyzed a case study conducted in the mid 2000's on student (K-12) poverty in South Dakota, which served as a starting point for data. Additionally, excerpts from an NPR interview with a single mother of two children were applied in the creation of this essay. I reflect upon my personal experience with living in a rural area, where internet access is dependent on the weather conditions. The solutions offered in this essay are plausible, but unlikely due to the nature of change that would [have to] occur within the school district.

Disparities in Distance Learning Equality

There are two major factors that contribute to learning inequality in an online format, and they both involve access to essential resources: internet, and a capable device.

I am lucky to have high speed internet virtually everywhere I go. I have a hotspot built into my phone and I can tether up to 5 devices at one time. I faced a challenge this online semester: my tech was outdated. The tablet I had from 2014 wasn't capable of running the different programs I needed, and the camera was deemed 'inadequate' by several professors. I bought a new tablet with money I had saved up, and was able to get back on track. Many families are struggling to figure out how they will pay next month's rent, let alone purchasing a new electronic device.

When many people think about learning inequality, they look to third world countries. There is plenty of evidence to back up these thoughts: "We draw evidence from a recent phone survey conducted by Young Lives in Ethiopia, two states of India, Peru and Vietnam. Logit regression results suggest that students from a wealthy background in India and Vietnam are more likely to benefit more from online learning scheme. Rural students in all four countries are significantly less likely to experience online learning. The disparity in accessing online learning resources may further reinforce inequalities in achievement in resource-scarce countries." (NewsRx LLC, 2020). What many people fail to realize is that similar learning inequalities exist within our country. "In the state of South Dakota, as of 2006, 37.1 percent of students are listed as economically disadvantaged as determined by their eligibility for free/reduced lunch (South Dakota Department of Education, 2008a). From 2002 through 2007, there was a 7 percent increase in the economically disadvantaged population (South Dakota Department of Education, 2007). The actual percentage of students who live in poverty may be higher due to the fact that not all students turn in free/reduced lunch forms." (O'Dpan,

Disparities in Distance Learning Equality

2012). This excerpt is taken from a case study that focused on k-12 student poverty in South Dakota in the mid 2000's. While the data may be outdated, it serves as a starting point. As I mentioned above, outdated technology and access to sufficient internet are the main source of issues when it comes to online learning inequality. We could tackle this issue one of two ways: reduce poverty, and/or give students access to the essential resources they need for education. It would be admirable to tackle both of these issues, but the second is much easier to address than the first, and it can also be accomplished much faster.

Many people propose that schools provide laptops for their students. Not only does this generate a tremendous bill for the school (don't forget there will need to be tech support for these devices and some form of a repair program if devices are physically damaged), it doesn't address the issue of internet access. Many families living in rural areas get internet via a satellite connection. This is very problematic, as the internet will go out virtually every time a storm system moves through the area. My 'adopted grandparents' have a ranch just north of CR-106, and the Wi-Fi goes out every time there is a major thunderstorm or intense winter storm. They are able to still watch television to stay up to date on the news and weather information, but cannot access broadband services. Providing laptops or Chromebooks for students only tackles half of the issue.

As a starting point, I propose this: schools should be permitted to keep their libraries and computer labs open, with social distancing measures in place. Most schools have the resources in-house to fuel student success, but these resources have been taken away with the closure of school districts. "It's estimated that about 10% of college students - that's about 2 million people - don't have access to a laptop for school. Experts say that might be actually much higher now, when so many families are sharing devices to work remotely or to keep younger children in

Disparities in Distance Learning Equality

virtual school." (Nadworny via NPR, 2020). Policies would be implemented so that each computer, associated keyboard and mice are disinfected after a student is finished using the device. This policy should also apply to shared devices such as printers and projectors. A platform should exist where students can check-out a computer for a period of time to complete their schoolwork. A challenge is presented with this time constraint: sometimes assignments take much longer than expected to complete. This is a tricky situation to navigate, especially with so many students needing access to a computer. The simple solution would be to allow said student to take home a laptop or Chromebook, but it does not solve the issue of a lack of internet access. My solution: allocate the funds currently going towards school lunches and other such recurring expenses that are not being used during the Covid-19 crisis to provide portable hotspots for students who do not have broadband access at home. These hotspots will be an investment for the school, as they can be re-activated and used in the future for mobile schoolwork. In fact, our university already does this. While the hotspots are paid for via student fees, the resources still exist.

The biggest issues we face with these solutions is the governing bodies of our school districts. This solution would require them to change various policies, and completely re-write a district budget in a very uncertain time. This does not mean that it is impossible. If school districts truly care about the success of students (and their district reports for that matter), this would be a solution to consider.

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