

Sustaining an Asset-based Approach in the Midst of the Coronavirus

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I recently spoke with a teacher about a live teaching video call she had with her first-grade class in which one of her students joined along with two younger siblings. The student had to take care of her siblings, but she didn't want to miss class. This conversation made me think about how we respond to our students' circumstances. On the one hand, we can feel sorry for a student who has responsibilities at home and worry that she may not be able to keep up academically. However, taking a more positive perspective, we can see the strong motivation and management skills this first-grade student is building even while learning remotely. - Molly

REMOTE TEACHING AND LEARNING

As we move through this unprecedented time of remote teaching and learning and the uncertainty around the future of our educational system, we cannot lose sight of our multilingual learners' assets and what they have learned and will continue to learn during COVID-19 distance learning, away from our physical school buildings.

As educators begin to consider what the future of education will look like, we often worry how far behind our students may fall: *How are we going to catch students up? How are we going to mitigate the impact of English learning loss?* and *How are we going to handle students falling even further behind?* Questions like these stem from equity-driven concerns, but while they represent important concerns, a constant focus on the negative aspects of our current situation

ignores the meaningful learning that comes from the home experiences of our multilingual students. Deficit thinking leads to lower expectations and lack of access to grade-appropriate instruction and engagement for many students, including multilingual learners (TNTP, 2018).

As members of the WIDA consortium, Massachusetts educators have long focused on bringing an asset-based approach into their classrooms. By encouraging students to see their own experiences as assets, we hope to give them the power to unleash their learning skills (WIDA, 2019a). We want to encourage educators to transfer this “can-do” approach to distance education. Below are some of the ways that our students can continue to learn while they are physically away from the classroom:

LANGUAGE AND LITERACY DEVELOPMENT DURING SELF-DIRECTED LEARNING

While it is natural in an English-only school environment to focus on the loss of English-language skills (and we agree that is a concern), many of our students are now reconnecting to their home languages in ways that will be positive for their future educational development. They may be connecting more closely with family members and with their family’s cultural background. Research cited in USDOE (n.d.) has identified many benefits of bilingualism, including stronger cognitive development and flexibility in thinking and self-control. Heritage language development, in particular, is connected to a stronger sense of identity, which can lead to greater interest and motivation. Moreover, learning that happens in all of a student’s languages has been shown to lead to deeper understanding.

Many teachers and family members have noticed that, freed from expectations about what they are “supposed” to be learning, students are exploring subjects that truly interest them. Some students are making TikTok videos at home, which might not initially seem like serious learning until you consider the self-management skills that go into producing a video, not to mention the technological skills needed to use these online platforms. Some students are spending more time playing outside or creating art or improving their collaboration skills by playing video games. No longer forced to spend many hours a day learning what someone else has decided is important, students are free to decide for themselves what is meaningful. When students are engaged in activities that interest them, they develop a host of valuable language and literacy skills: digital literacy, “tier three” vocabulary words (often bilingually!), and the use of explaining-and-describing language to share their newfound knowledge with family members (also bilingually).

SELF-AWARENESS AND SOCIOEMOTIONAL SKILLS

Our students are being asked to do a lot of self-management in both their schoolwork and their home lives. In school, students are often told what to do as well as when and how to do it. This kind of structure isn't possible in the current environment. Students are being given more independence while their family members are working either inside or outside the home. Many are taking care of themselves in ways they may not have experienced before. They are making decisions and managing their own time. This leads to greater independence, as students figure out how they learn best or sometimes, even more importantly, what impedes their learning. Some students are learning that they really need structure and support, while others learn that they do best when given the freedom to choose their own structure.

Students will undoubtedly have a variety of different experiences. They may have seen their families dealing with problems they have not had to manage before. Some are being asked to care for siblings or other family members. Others are working to support their families financially. Still others are spending more time with family members, creating new and deeper relationships. We have to be empathetic when discovering and building upon the strength and resilience that our students have been finding within themselves.

BRIDGING STUDENT HOME-LEARNING EXPERIENCES WITH FORMAL INSTRUCTION.

It's not enough to simply acknowledge or be aware of what students are learning during this coronavirus time; we must also build on these experiences and assets in our own instruction. Below we offer suggestions on how to do this:


1. *Allow students to share their experiences.* When we are finally able to come back together, in whatever capacity that is, we must provide time for students to tell their stories. Our students will need space to reflect on the changes that were suddenly forced upon them. *What did they do during this time? Did they experience grief or loss? Did they build a greater connection to their families? Did they discover a new interest?* By allowing space for students to share, teachers will gain essential insight into their students' experiences, while helping to rebuild the community we will all need as we return to a new reality.
2. *Encourage self-reflection about learning.* Our students should be encouraged to identify what they have learned about themselves as learners. *What worked? What didn't work? What motivated them?* Also important in this process is that teachers need to *listen* and use this information to inform their own practices. Some students may have found that they learn better in the company of their peers or with more direct teacher feedback. Others may have

thrived with the opportunity to self-manage and work remotely. We have to help our students build on their new understanding of their own strengths.

3. *Learn from our students.* As we listen to our students' experiences and what they learned about themselves, we need to take note: *Are there interests we didn't know our students had? Are there ways to encourage students to continue pursuing their interests? What motivated and engaged students remotely? What didn't? Are there ways to incorporate into our learning standards the funds of knowledge our students will be bringing with them as they return to school?* We must use this time to self-reflect and figure out ways to take a more Universal-Design-for-Learning (CAST, n.d.) and Can-Do (WIDA, 2019b) approach to curricular development and instructional decisions.
4. *Hold students to a high academic standard.* We cannot fall into the trap of simplifying grade-level work because students are perceived as being "behind." Our students will still need cognitively appropriate work and assignments, as well as high expectations. We will have to figure out where our students are academically and consider what learning is truly essential: *What are the most important skills the students need in order to be successful? How can we differentiate learning for different students while holding all of them to high standards? How can we keep our students engaged and motivated?* We must continue to allow our students to try out new knowledge and skills and to grapple with challenging assignments.
5. *Maintain strong home-school connections.* Caregivers will have become more involved in their students' learning during this time, and we should encourage their continued involvement. Family members can offer a different perspective as to what engaged or motivated their students while they were learning at home: *What did they learn about their students? What do they want for their students? How do they believe they can support learning?* Many educators are learning to use translation services to connect with multilingual families and talk with them about their experience having their students learn at home. Information can be gathered through surveys, parent/teacher groups, open houses, phone calls, or text messages. Caregivers should be viewed as real partners in shaping the educational experiences of their students; this is a perfect opportunity to ensure that parents are given a voice as we move forward.

CLOSING THOUGHTS

Only when we expand upon the definition of what it means to learn will we

start to see that our students are learning a great number of things while staying home. Our students will not all have had the exact same experiences, but all of their varying experiences will have had a significant impact on the new ways of thinking and learning that they will bring with them when they return to school. 

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