

Chapter 9

Stop Saying Virtual Learning Does Not Work: Effective Distance Learning for K–3 Students

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ABSTRACT

Based on the experience of an early childhood educator and the current scholarly research, this chapter describes what can be done to effectively teach K-3 students from a distance. From the learning management systems that forgot to optimize their servers for an onslaught of hundreds of thousands of more students, to the schools that wanted to reopen but could not afford to buy air purifiers any more than they could buy soap or toilet paper for student bathrooms, no one in U.S. schools was prepared for the COVID-19 pandemic. Stakeholders need to stop saying virtual learning does not work for these students, and implement effective strategies moving forward. In this chapter, the current literature on online learning is reviewed as a guide for effective K-3 teaching, and examples are provided of successful tools from experiences of the authors as K-3 teachers and parents.

INTRODUCTION

Based on the experience of an early childhood educator and the current scholarly research, this chapter describes what can be done to effectively teach K-3 students from a distance. For example, teacher train-

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ing is an essential for ensuring effective distance learning pedagogical approaches (Miguel et al., 2020). Veteran early childhood educators who are comfortable with technology are a rarity amongst others in education who may not even know the keyboard shortcuts to copy and paste, let alone how to manage applications from Microsoft or Google. Indeed, Zhang et al. (2019) indicated that veteran teachers need access to professional development that addresses technology integration and use. With the COVID-19 pandemic setting precedent, instructional technology training must be prioritized with other aspects of the job, like emergency management.

In particular, instructional design principles should be included in training so that educators can create and implement assignments that work well online. For example, every school district should have a dedicated learning management system support facilitator, who is very knowledgeable and helpful. Even better would be a staff member at each school to serve as a dedicated learning management system trainer and support facilitator. Most professional development courses are not mandatory, and it is up to teachers to sign up for them. Training should go beyond the recent fad of creating a Bitmoji classroom, which can help create the classroom environment but does not facilitate learning for students.

Another prerequisite for effective early childhood education at a distance is ensuring positive educator attitudes and buy-in. One of the most incredible outcomes of education during a pandemic was how incredibly the challenge of adapting was met by so many educators. Particularly, educators needed to be fluid in their instructional practices to continue providing a solid school culture and effective educational experiences (Manca & Delfino, 2021). No one becomes a teacher for the money; they are already incredibly underpaid while being incredibly over-qualified, and they spend hundreds of dollars of their own money throughout the school year. Teachers overwhelmingly choose the profession because of their love of children and their belief in the power of education, and their dedication rarely ever wavers. There were teachers who accepted the unlikelihood of seeing their students in person, and they committed themselves to spending the summer trying to figure out the best and most effective ways to teach virtually. The objective of this chapter is to provide a guide for effective K-3 teaching, as well as provide examples of successful tools from experiences of the authors as K-3 teachers and parents.

BACKGROUND

For the past few years, there has been a push to implement social-emotional learning in the classroom (Wenz-Gross et al., 2018). This is crucial for early childhood education online. Social-emotional learning is a methodology that helps students to learn more about their own emotions and to better understand the emotions of others to achieve more positive social and emotional outcomes in and outside of the classroom. While most schools officially have at least one dedicated counselor, the truth is they unofficially have tens of counselors in their school because teachers often serve as the first person to attend to a child's emotional needs.

The pandemic also increased the calls for teachers to care for themselves and to never let it get to a point where they are overwhelmed. There was also an influx of teachers who soon became experts in virtual learning applications, which served to make learning more engaging and to mimic in-person classroom activities. Applications like Nearpod, Flipgrid, and Kahoot became staples, especially in the elementary classroom. For K-3 students, visuals and repetition are paramount online. As an adult, you take for granted your imagination and critical thinking skills, and you do not realize how it is not something that simply exists, but it is something that has been developed through years and years of quality

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