

Education Week

How Do We Teach Literacy During a Pandemic When Access and Equity Are an Issue?

By Peter DeWitt on July 13, 2020 7:55 AM



In *Focusing on the Essentials* ([September 2019. Educational Leadership. ASCD](#)), Schmoker wrote that we could be entering into the Golden Age of education if we (school communities, preservice- teaching programs, professional learning associations, etc.) concentrated on three important factors. Those three factors are clear, coherent curriculum, sound instruction, and authentic literacy.

As we know, we entered into another age of education, and it certainly didn't seem golden. For most people in school communities around the world, we entered into the pandemic age of education, and although many educators, leaders, parents, and students worked hard, it was not the best of academic learning experiences.

The interesting part about Schmoker's article is that those three aspects that he believes contribute to the Golden Age can certainly help us with our focus as we enter into the autumn of remote or hybrid learning. In fact, focusing on clear, coherent curriculum, sound remote instruction, and authentic literacy could help us make a bad situation a bit better. If we are all so worried about "*students falling behind*," then we should focus less on how bad all of this is (and we agree it has not been as good as being together in person) and more on how to provide those three aspects in the fall despite our challenges.

A Focus on Literacy

Schmoker's focus on literacy is not a new one. As a former 1st grade teacher, beginning my career in 1995, literacy was a hot topic back then. There were constant arguments between a phonics-based approach and a whole-language approach. Sound familiar?

Although that argument between phonics and whole language is still prevalent in many educational circles, it took a bit of a backseat to COVID-19. As schools began to close and teachers quickly were making a transition from in-person teaching to pandemic teaching, the mere task of getting students to show up to online classes became an issue (**6 Reasons Students Aren't Showing Up for Virtual Learning**).

In the article, Schmoker provided some reading and writing guidelines for students that we can try to adhere to during this pandemic.

Students should read and/or be read to for a minimum of 60 minutes daily, across the curriculum, at every grade level. And they should write for at least 40 minutes (Allington, 2011; Shanahan, personal communication). In such amounts, reading and writing would have a game-changing impact on all learning.

So, the question becomes, how do we get students to read and write if they aren't even showing up? How do we dive into these specific literacy practices Schmoker refers to when parents may be essential workers and cannot help their younger children or parents really do not understand how to help their children read? After all, in Schmoker's article he wrote, "*We must address its root cause: our equally unfocused preservice and professional training.*" If universities have an issue teaching preservice teachers how to teach literacy, then we can imagine that parents and caregivers may struggle with it, too.

A Pandemic Example of Literacy Practices?

As we all scrambled with the social-emotional impact of school closings, as well as the academic impact where we focused on teaching from a remote location, Andrew Fletcher, senior executive director of early literacy (and the Universal Literacy Initiative) for the New York City education department had an idea. Fletcher and members of the department wanted to help students remotely in a way that could supplement what they may already be getting or not getting in their home environment during this difficult time.

According to an official announcement from the office of the mayor of N.Y.C.,

Mayor Bill de Blasio and Schools Chancellor Richard A. Carranza announced the launch of Let's Learn NYC!, a new educational public television program produced by the WNET Group in partnership with the New York City Department of Education (DOE) featuring lessons for children in 3K through second grade that will supplement remote learning.

Having worked with Fletcher and his group of hundreds of K-2 literacy instructional coaches over the last year, I can attest to the creativity and leadership he provides, and his job is not an easy one. Close to 48 percent of 3rd graders in N.Y.C. are not reading at grade level, according to New York state tests results.

Let's Learn NYC! was inspired by the fact that Fletcher and his administrative team, as well as the instructional coaches they work with, understand the struggles the families they serve experience helping their children with schoolwork. Perhaps that struggle is due to parents and caregivers who are working when their children need to be online for school, or that students do not have access due to a lack of a device or Wi-Fi, and also because parents and caregivers

may not speak English fluently. Those are all issues that Fletcher and his team had to think about when developing the show.

According to Fletcher,

During this time of social distancing and remote learning, it became apparent to me that the model of remote instruction that was being put into place was one crafted, not necessarily by design, for the typically developing third grade student and above. This student, a native English speaker, who as long as she or he had access to a digital device and connectivity to the internet, could engage with the remote instruction being delivered from the child's teacher.

Fletcher went on to write,

We know of course that this isn't the case for many students in grades three and above and certainly not for grades two and below (and of course not for any students who are multilingual learners and/or students with disabilities). Even if access to devices and connectivity aren't issues, young learners certainly need the support of family members to engage in remote learning. They may need help with device navigation and certainly with reading what is being sent by their teachers. And this is again while family members are most likely trying to work from home and dealing with the stress of our current surreal time.

What Does Literacy Television Look Like?

Fletcher writes,

"Let's Learn NYC!"—an hourlong show, quickly ramping up to two hours, with instruction delivered by New York City educators (Universal Literacy reading coaches and other instructional leads/specialists, filmed at their homes with a digital device using the materials they have on hand) that can simply be accessed by turning on a television. We especially wanted this—no digital devices, internet access, or cable access for that matter, required. Since most homes in the City can access Channel 13 readily, this seemed like an excellent solution. While instruction is provided across the content areas and will include social-emotional learning as well, I've made sure that literacy is ever present—you'll see foundational skill work, reading, and writing.

For those critics stating that sitting students in front of a television isn't teaching, the reality is that this pandemic has offered challenges we have not seen before in education, *Let's Learn NYC!* is similar to Sesame Street, which most of us grew up with, and it is delivered in both English and Spanish. This summer, each show will have an American Sign Language interpreter. To see samples of the show, [click here](#).

Through the one-hour segments over a couple of hours, students and families can learn phonics, phonemic awareness, and other important literacy skills. And if families want to offer feedback for each and every show, Fletcher and his team have set up a feedback system. Fletcher writes, *A nice feature we were able to include is that we let families know in each episode that they can call 311 with feedback.* This has not only been a great way to get feedback from families, but it has also opened up a new form of communication between everyone involved with the show and those who watch and learn from it.

In the End

COVID-19 has hit us hard in a variety of ways. First and foremost is the number of fatalities it has caused and the aftermath of trauma that many have experienced because of the virus. As you reflect on your own challenges that were created when the pandemic hit, please remember that N.Y.C. was ground zero for the coronavirus. The infection and death rates were higher than anywhere else in the world. So, not only was Fletcher and his team trying to engage students remotely, they were doing it from the hottest spot of the coronavirus pandemic.

As we all reflect on our responses to the pandemic, Fletcher and his team responded in a way that took research, like that of Schmoker's, into consideration, as well as the countless challenges their communities were facing before and during the pandemic. *Let's Learn NYC!* will continue during the summer and provide students and families with some much-needed learning focus until they can all get back into the classroom together, where they can do this work to a deeper aspect.

Many of us are trying to reinvent the way we teach in order to better serve the populations we teach, and *Let's Learn NYC!* is certainly one example of how that reinvention looks, and the lessons available can be viewed by anyone, so those outside of N.Y.C. can benefit, too.

Peter DeWitt, Ed.D., is the author of several books including his newest release [Instructional Leadership: Creating Practice Out Of Theory](#) (Corwin Press, 2020). [Connect with him on Twitter](#) or through his [YouTube channel](#).