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Equity Literacy During the COVID19 Crisis

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We at the Equity Literacy Institute have been blown away by how educators have responded to the COVID-19 crisis. Adapting to unexpected conditions is no small task. We appreciate the challenge of coping with our own stressors while also attempting to do our best for each student and family. This is what our equity commitment calls us to do.

In this spirit we wanted to share what we've been thinking about when shining an equity lens on the past several weeks and what could be the next several months.

In the immediate term, we understand that attempts to move to distance learning with little time to prepare while continuing to offer critical services, like providing free meals, raises what might appear to be new equity concerns. During this crisis, unprecedented in our and our students' lives, let's commit to keeping equity front and center. Following the "prioritization principle" of equity literacy (EquityLiteracy.org/equity-principles), we can start by considering how we're prioritizing the interests of families with the least amount of access to material resources or who, for other reasons, are impacted by the crisis in disproportionate ways.

At the same time, we should recognize that the gaps in access to resources and other protections that disproportionately affect some students' abilities to transition to distance learning or to prioritize home-based schoolwork are not new. They're the same gaps that marginalized many of the same students before COVID-19 and that will continue to do so after the crisis if we fail to make fundamental shifts, not just to what

we're *doing*, but also to how we're *thinking*. After all, what we think drives what we do. For example, data show that people of color are disproportionately contracting and dying from the virus—a new reality connected to not-so-new layers of structural racism, including access to living wage work, access to equitable healthcare, and others. When we talk about this crisis only in terms of its newness, we fail to recognize its connection with generations of inequity and limit the equity impact of our responses.

This is where we begin: for many students—those experiencing institutional racism, suffering the impact of poverty and economic injustice, coping with sexism or ableism or transphobia or heterosexism in and out of schools—this *type* of crisis might be novel, but the inequity crisis is ever-present. Many of us have been thinking about the impact of gaps in home access to technology, for example, long before the sudden transition most schools are making to distance learning. Many of us weren't. If we're in that second group, we should start thinking about it, but we also should grapple with our previous failure to think about it and consider what else we're missing with that way of thinking. That's the path to equity literacy.

So, these are the questions with which we invite you to grapple alongside our grappling: How can we put and *keep* equity front and center in our perspectives, institutional cultures, and practices during the immediate-term crisis while remaining cognizant of all the longer-term crises? How can we apply basic equity literacy principles in order to mindfully and urgently attend to,

rather than exacerbate, the challenges and barriers families are facing? How can we be both *culturally* responsive and *equity* literate?

Below we offer a non-exhaustive list of equity considerations—what we must consider in order to be equity-responsive in the current context—followed by a list of recommendations for maximizing equity efforts in the coming weeks or months.

Equity Considerations

- Remember, families ***have different levels of access to material resources***, a reality exacerbated in times of crisis, especially when people are being laid off from work. We can't assume all families have the resources needed to engage in distance learning or to adapt in other ways to a new mode of schooling. This is not a reflection of a lack of *desire* or gaps in how they value education, but a reflection of income and wealth inequality.
- For example, ***access to computers and the Internet is not distributed equally***. Some families do not have stable Internet access at all, so even if we provide laptops or notebooks they might not be able to access online learning platforms easily. Others might have access only to lower-speed networks, not conducive to streaming or videoconferencing. Design learning experiences with this in mind.
- ***Some families cannot even afford more traditional learning resources*** like pencils, paper, art supplies, and books.
- Many popular videoconference participation rules we see posted online—*find a quiet space to work* or *log in on time* or *keep your camera on*—don't account for different levels of access to material resources or for varied home circumstances. Some homes don't have separate quiet spaces for schoolwork. Some students are coping with several stressful situations in their homes. These sorts of ***implicitly shaming policies can create more distance between students and teachers***, as they do even when we're not in the throes of a pandemic.
- ***Disparities also can be exacerbated through distance learning for students with learning differences*** and special learning needs. Again, consider the *prioritization principle* here. Students who do not have learning differences can adjust to platforms and approaches that make learning materials accessible to students who do have them. But students who do have them cannot so easily adapt, if they can adapt at all, to platforms and approaches that fail to take their access needs into consideration.
- Remember that ***some students are more relational by nature***. For them, distance learning might be an especially difficult way to access and share knowledge. Consider the *fix injustice, not kids* principle of equity literacy. Focus on elevating access and on building relationships rather than presuming students are simply trying to avoid work.
- Data show that white, middle-class-and-wealthier, college-educated workers are most likely to be able to work at home while economically marginalized people of color without a college degree are least likely. As a result, ***the children of the latter are more likely to have home responsibilities during the day, such as taking care of younger siblings or family elders***.
- We appreciate so many curriculum companies, museums, and other organizations making virtual materials available for free as well as the networks of teachers sharing materials with one another. Still, ***it's critical that these materials are vetted with an equity, ant bias lens***.
- For two decades research has shown that the ***bias, bullying, and inequities that***

students of color, students experiencing poverty, LGBTQ+ students, transgender students, young women, and others experience in person are replicated with great precision online. In some ways the move to online learning could open more avenues for bullying, harassment, oppression, and bias. We must be attentive to, and prepared to address, this.

- Remember that many parents and other caretakers are coping with significant stressors, and that on average ***these stressors are elevated for families of color, families that are economically marginalized, and families coping with other forms of oppression.*** We need to be careful not to expect that all parents and caretakers will have the time or energy to actively engage in their children's learning.

Equity Recommendations

- ***Suspend grading and find other, more constructive, ways to offer feedback.*** (Let's talk about this as a longer-term shift, as well.) Also limit or eliminate homework.
- Appoint curriculum specialists with demonstrated equity understandings to vet curricula in order to ***ensure materials that might marginalize students and families, normalize dominant narratives, or omit historically silenced voices are not being used.*** These curriculum specialists also can support teachers as they lesson plan for distance learning.
- Be sure to make communications regarding everything from district scheduling plans moving forward to student work expectations ***available to families in multiple languages.***
- Provide teacher training on ***how to respond equitably*** to online racism,

sexism, heterosexism, transphobia, and other forms of bias and oppression. In our focus groups with students who experience these oppressions, the most common equity concern they share is dissatisfaction with how adults in their schools address (or fail to address) these incidents.

- ***Conduct regular student technology and internet access assessments.*** This will support applications of the *prioritization principle*, allowing us to determine which students and families need the most, and the most immediate, support.
- ***Help more equitably distribute distance learning tools and materials as well as quality Internet access.*** Move toward a 1:1 model for student technology devices. Provide devices to students who do not have them. Many Internet service providers are now offering free service to students. Identify which providers are offering free access in your area and help families connect with them. An additional option is to provide students with Internet hotspots to use at home.
- Find ways to ***distribute other learning supplies*** to families that need them. For example, paper, pens, art materials or books could be distributed along with breakfasts or lunches, if your school or district is still providing them.
- Identify ***a point person to focus on helping families with Internet access and other technology challenges.*** Provide a number people can call and specific hours to call if they need help. Be sure that help can be provided in all languages represented at the school. Do not expect individual teachers to troubleshoot technology issues with families.
- We can help some parents and other caretakers feel connected by sending

them messages or resources to support their children’s learning if they have the time and energy to do so given all the potential stressors they’re facing. ***Avoid messages that pressure families or that might implicitly shame*** those who do not have the time and energy to do so due to those other stressors.

- Make sure learning materials are ***tailored to address the needs of students with (dis)abilities or other learning differences as well as students who are learning English.***
- Assign somebody to ***coordinate with local and state housing agencies, homeless shelters, and other organizations that support students who are homeless.*** That person should work directly with these organizations to ensure that students who are homeless have access to the resources they need to be engaged in learning activities.

Closing Thoughts

We believe that equity should *always* be an urgent concern, front and center. Equity should drench every policy, practice, and institutional culture—every conversation.

Now we find ourselves in one of those proverbial measuring stick moments. What is our equity commitment? Do we find matters of equity expendable enough to set them aside so that we can concentrate on the practical stuff? Do we understand how, if we bow to that temptation, we are merely reproducing the inequitable conditions that already exist in our classrooms and schools for many students and families?

We hope that these considerations and strategies are helpful in the immediate term to address concerns we should address *right now*. But we also hope to encourage reflection on the issues underlying these concerns as we move beyond COVID-19. Below we share a few additional resources that might be helpful for both.

Additional Resources

- [“COVID-19 and Videoclassism: Implicit Bias, Videojudgment, and Why I’m Terrified to Have You Look Over My Shoulder,”](#) an article by Equity Literacy Institute core team member, Dr. Taharee Jackson
- [“Online Learning in the Wake of COVID-19: Tips and Resources for PreK-12 with Equity in Mind,”](#) a resource-full blog post with links to all sorts of technology resources and equity-minded tips for using them, from New America.
- [COVID-19 Racial Equity and Social Justice Resources](#) – a resource list from Racial Equity Tools
- [“The Coronavirus Pandemic and the Racial Wealth Gap,”](#) an article for the Center for American Progress by Danyelle Solomon and Darrick Hamilton
- [“Coronavirus Has Exposed American’s Digital Divide,”](#) an article in *Jacobin* by Nicole Aschoff
- [“Ten Ways to Fight for Social Justice During the Coronavirus Pandemic,”](#) an article written for teens and tweens by Palika Makam for *Teen Vogue*
- COVID-19 [Resources for Undocumented Communities](#)
- The National Center for Transgender Equality’s [Coronavirus Guide](#)