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K-12 Podcast: Final Script

Zoom School: The Digital Divide During the Covid-19 Pandemic.

Ambient sound: students talking over one another over zoom→ fades out with a musical jingle

Lena: Can you hear me?

Tanvi: I think you're muted.

Lena: Wait, can you turn your camera on?

Sound of a school bell rings

Hannah: This is not what school sounded like for most students just a year ago.

Ambient sound tidbits of “typical school-classroom”: bell ringing; lockers slamming; hallway sounds]. → underneath Hannah’s narration

Before the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, a typical school day for the average American consisted of sitting in a school classroom and regularly engaging with friends, teachers, and other peers.

But as the state of the pandemic spread across the nation, the things many students had become accustomed to in their learning environment started to disappear.

Destinee: To put it short, school turned into “Zoom school.”

Lena: Students found themselves confronting a culminating problem called the Digital Divide

The first level of the digital divide is the gap in access to technologies, the second level divide is in technology skills and literacies, and the final, third level is in the returns on those technology accesses, skills, and literacies [Robinson et al 2015; Hargittai 2011; van Deursen 2015; Puckett 2019].

musical jingle

Tanvi: As we were high school students, too, not too long ago, we wanted to dive into examining how COVID-19 has impacted these levels of the digital divide for various high school settings around the United States.

Instead of focusing on one type of high school experience, you are going to hear stories from all across the country and all across modes of learning.

musical jingle

Hannah: We begin with Shelby, a 17-year-old student at a traditional public high school in Wisconsin, who found herself dismayed at her school's initial response to the pandemic.

INTERVIEWEE SHELBY AUDIO: "At the beginning of the pandemic, our school told us our grades wouldn't change regardless of whether we did work or not, so a lot of students sort of just gave up and the teachers were struggling to, a lot to adapt, too."

Hannah: As the pandemic continued to sweep the nation, it became increasingly clear that neither students like Shelby nor the individual school systems themselves were ready to brace technology issues.

When a large portion of the organization that we, as students, depend on for education and structure began to struggle, it was only a matter of time before their students did, too.

musical jingle

Destinee: I'm sure that it must have been really weird for many students to have their school just tell them that they didn't have to participate in school if they didn't want to.

Hannah: It's definitely evident that her school didn't know how to approach digital learning, although, I'm sure it was no different for a lot of schools at the time.

musical jingle

Destinee: Across the country in Dallas, Texas, the school system in a public magnet high school had a pretty different experience in the way they were able to transition to a technology based learning environment.

The Townview Magnet Center at Yvonne A. Ewell Townview Center is composed of six independent magnet high schools that focus on different student strengths, and 17-year-old Adrian is in The School of Science and Engineering.

For Adrian's school environment, technology has always been an integrated part of the curriculum even before the pandemic, and he has participated in technology-based classes for a while.

Destinee: Even though life has been different for him and many other students, Adrian has seen this whole experience as a learning opportunity that will ultimately prepare him for his future.

INTERVIEWEE ADRIAN AUDIO: "I actually want to pursue a computer science career, graphic design, stuff like that, I feel like I've been well prepared, like students that have had to deal with this online stuff like they've gotten accustomed to it, and if they center their career upon this, then it will be very easy to handle."

Destinee: Adrian's experience differs from what has been observed in studies conducted by researchers such as Matthew Raffalow [2020] in the third level of the digital divide in returns on access & skill.

Adrian, has been taught tech skills and his skills in technology use are valued by his

school.

He demonstrates the way school structures that emphasise technology skills in their students can encourage those students to enter technology focused jobs beyond high school [Puckett 2019].

musical jingle

Lena: I feel like after hearing from Adrian at a magnet school structure and Shelby at a traditional public high school, I kinda get how the context of a school can affect the students technology understanding.

It makes me think about what another type of school might look like when it comes to technology.

Destinee: Like what?

Lena: Well, vocational technical high schools are one type of school that isn't always highlighted in the media when it comes to education. People don't always know how this type of school works which could have an impact on if the student's technology skills are recognized in the same ways [Light 2001; Sims 2014; Rafalow 2020].

musical jingle

I want to explain how it works at South Shore Vocational Technical High School in Hanover, Massachusetts, about 20 minutes outside of Boston.

The school serves about 640 high school students working on an educational model that includes one week of students participating in an academic class cycle, followed by a week of participating in a shop cycle for respective occupational fields of study.

South Shore Vocational Technical High School has been able to provide students with technology resources for a while, even before the pandemic.

Jerry has taught engineering at South Shore for the last eight years, and he has watched the ways the school environment has helped students access technology over the years.

INTERVIEWEE JERRY AUDIO: "For the most part, not all students had computers, so the classes that needed to use computers, we would have, you know, a set of computers in the classroom. Calculators, we didn't require students to buy their own calculators because not all of them can afford it."

Lena: But even in these schools with more integrated technology before the pandemic, teachers had to get creative when their hands-on environment was stripped away from them.

INTERVIEWEE JERRY AUDIO: "We had an automotive teacher that was literally, he plugged on a GoPro on his head and he was going into his vehicle and taking things out and showing things all a part so, everyone kind of approached it in a different way."

musical jingle

Tanvi: I feel like vocational technical schools sound like they had technology pretty integrated in some of those shops.

Lena: Yeah, I definitely agree with you, but I think struggles really came into play in shops that rely so much on hands-on learning elements.

Tanvi: Yeah, I actually heard from another student in a similar educational structure about just that.

musical jingle

Just a two-hour drive away from the vocational school Jerry teaches at, Finn, a 16-year-old student at Smith Vocational High School, in Northampton, Massachusetts, felt like the transition to online learning was difficult.

He described the way that both students and teachers used technology pretty infrequently before the pandemic hit.

INTERVIEWEE FINN AUDIO: "Once in a while, you know we would have computers to do something online, so it would be easier to, like, type up an essay instead of write it, and stuff like that."

Tanvi: We can see how going from occasionally using technology to being asked to provide and receive education in a virtual format, could be extremely difficult for teachers and students [Hargittai, 2008].

INTERVIEWEE FINN AUDIO: "Well at first in the pandemic, we didn't have any Zoom classes, but then when we started in Fall, this year, it was definitely interesting, and I think a lot of the teachers were having a hard time cause my school, it's more, it's a vocational school, so most of the kids came 'cause like hands-on and stuff."

musical jingle

Hannah: Woah, honestly Finn's experience in a vocational school sounds so different to what I think about when I think back to Shelby's at a traditional public high school or Adrian's in a magnet program.

Destinee: Yeah, it really shows how much the organizational context you find yourself in can lead to different technology successes and challenges.

musical jingle

Hannah: Whether in a traditional high school, a magnet program, a vocational school, or something wildly different, the structure of the school a student found themselves in as their daily life shifted due to COVID-19 played an integral role in their learning experience.

Lena: The lock-downs and halts on daily life throughout the pandemic, have been able to highlight the structural differences in how different schools responded and supported, or didn't support, students and teachers.

Tanvi: We hope you take these stories with you and understand how education looks so different for so many people and the organization students find themselves in often plays a major role in the success and challenges people face.

Destinee: Absolutely, and with that being said, I think it's time for me to end the Zoom.

Lena: Thank you! See you next time!

musical jingle

Hannah: Next time you're on a Zoom call, hey, maybe you'll remember these stories when you ask your next "Are you on mute?"