Editorial

Unforeseen Outcomes of Remote Learning

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During the past year our country faced many challenges. The SARS COVID-19 pandemic is at the forefront and changed the lives of many people. The effects of the pandemic impacted multiple areas: politics, public health, medicine, research, education, etc. On a personal level, people's lives changed with social distancing, wearing of masks, limited gatherings, travel restrictions, lockdown and the tragic loss of lives. Businesses and communities were forever affected by the lockdowns and phased reopening. The impact on education was felt at all levels K-12 as well as in higher education. How can we continue the educational process when our students can no longer gather in person? Remote learning became the norm as schools shut down to try to contain the spread of the virus. Both students and teachers had to adapt to a different style of education in a short period of time. Higher education students and institutions may have had an easier transition because most already had some experience with virtual or remote learning.

At the K-12 levels, parents, students and teachers dealt with not only a new delivery of the curriculum but also other issues such as child care, navigating technical issues, helping children with learning and the inherent isolation associated with remote learning. The sudden change was out of necessity, not a path that most would have chosen. As the pandemic continued into the summer months, school departments made the decisions to offer synchronous or asynchronous remote education, in-person instruction or a hybrid model. Most communities resorted to either a model of synchronous or asynchronous remote learning or a hybrid version. Hybrid models usually contain some component of remote learning. Parents chose different models based on their preferences or a student's skills, personality and learning style.

A 7-Year-Old Rises to the Occasion

In optometric education, most institutions implemented a hybrid model consisting of labs and clinical assignments in-person and lecture and seminar material delivered remotely. Remote learning had inherent challenges such as the need for reliable access to technology, a skill set to manipulate technology, the potential disconnect between teachers and classmates and difficulty staying motivated or focused. There has been much negative press and personal opinion expressed about the challenges of remote learning in grades K-12 with a rush to reopen all schools for in-person learning. It would be an understatement to imply that children do not miss the "normal" interactions with peers and teachers that were taken for granted before the pandemic. We are all striving for a time when a new normal allows the majority of the population to interact in a safe manner.

However, society should ask the question: Did a year of full-time or partial remote learning develop positive attributes in children and teens that will serve them well as they move through the education system? My own anecdotal experience comes from watching my 7-year-old grandson during full-time remote second grade. I have had the pleasure on several occasions of sharing the dining room table with his second-grade class as I worked remotely. The students all seemed highly engaged, eager to

participate and focused on the education process. Over time, my grandson learned a new skill set and can now easily manipulate the technology. Yes, he has even helped me on several occasions. I have watched him problem-solve as technical or learning problems occurred, initially seeking help from an adult but then becoming increasingly self-sufficient. At times he has become frustrated but has learned alternative ways of dealing with frustration and problem-solving. I highly commend his teachers for the attention they dedicate to each student. The school feels like a community, collaborative and supportive. My grandson does miss playing and talking in-person with his friends and most likely will attend in-person school when it is safe to do so. However, his remote learning experience has provided him the opportunity to learn a valuable skill set and become a much more independent, self-confident learner.

Valuable Skills for Future Optometrists

As educators in a healthcare profession, we strive to enroll and teach students who have problem-solving skills and exhibit self-directed, independent learning. These skills build self-confidence and allow the learner to accept responsibility for learning. In all medical professions, knowledge is constantly changing, which necessitates the need for lifelong, self-directed learning. These important skills occasionally seem to be lost in our current student population.

Given the extraordinary circumstances that the COVID-19 pandemic delivered, did it provide a unique learning opportunity for students? Will we be seeing a more independent, self-directed student who has the self-confidence and skill set to learn and solve problems? The bigger question is will these traits be maintained, fostered and supported when in-person learning returns?

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