

**Final Paper, Option B: Equity of the “One-to-One” Model in Virtual Instruction**

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### **Equity of the “One-to-One” Model in Virtual Instruction**

With the recent COVID-19 pandemic, many public school districts were thrust into the world of virtual learning and forced to abandon traditional in-person learning practices. Now, a year later, many of these districts have decided that the virtual model is here to stay, arguing that the virtual platform is the future of education. There were many difficulties with the sudden switch to virtual learning last spring, however, as many students and student families did not have the means to own their own computers to conduct their at-home learning. In an attempt to remedy this, a public school district in North Texas distributed laptops to students and families that requested them. When students had the opportunity to return to the classroom in the fall, this school district chose to continue with their online learning structure and to keep lending laptops out to students, regardless of if those students remained at home or returned to in-person learning. Moving forward into the new calendar school year, this North Texas public school district has decided to continue to have a number of its high schools remain on the virtual platform and commit to the “one-to-one” model (one device per every one student) for the next several years.

The “one-to-one” concept puts a district-issued computer device in the hands of every student or gives the student the option of bringing their own device with them to school. The school-issued device is theirs to keep for the year, with the notion that the student will use it for educational purposes and then return it at the end of the second semester. Teachers will virtually build out their lessons through the district’s online platform and students will have the ability to access lessons in class, on campus, or at home. Students will use these devices to learn and complete assignments and exams, with the majority of work being done on their own but guided by in-class teacher facilitation. The school district argues that they are keeping the “one-to-one”

model as it has proven to modernize the classroom, giving students the ability to access learning that is more in line with their 21st-century lifestyles.

The district further plans to have all of its schools following the “one-to-one” model in the next few years. Administrators argue that this model has proven to decrease the need for paper and cut back on school supply costs while also giving students access to their “classrooms” 24 hours a day. By utilizing this fully digital and student-centered method, the district argues, students will be in the driver’s seat for their own learning experience through the use of carefully teacher-designed virtual lessons. They may still come into the classroom to complete work where teachers can provide in-person support as needed, but students will ultimately be learning via their own learning style and at their own pace. The district hopes that students will further develop skills in problem-solving and analysis while growing in maturity and accountability.

Problems arise when assessing equity of the virtual, “one-to-one” model, however, as after a year of performing on this platform teachers have witnessed that it is increasingly difficult to meet all student needs. The “one-to-one” model emphasizes student autonomy but does not seem to account for disadvantaged students who are functioning at a lesser level than their more advantaged peers. This model seems to favor those who have previous knowledge of technology, adequate at-home internet connectivity, support from family members, and those who are naturally more self-motivated. Consequently, the virtual model negatively impacts disadvantaged students who are from lower socio-economic families and communities, non-traditional family systems, and those who are disabled, lower-level learners, and/or special education students. Furthermore, the students in these disadvantaged groups are often also a part of racially oppressed groups and tend to become labeled by discriminatory stratifications and stereotypes.

I teach 10th-grade general education at one of the district's high schools that has been chosen to adopt the “one-to-one” model and remain virtual in its method of content delivery. I have seen this past year how virtual education has impacted students of all varieties and how it has widened the gap between student groups. My students who are struggling with this method all fit into relatively similar categories, they are either from lower socio-economic backgrounds, lack at-home support, are part-time caretakers of their family members, are employed in before or after-school jobs, are lower-level learners, lack skills in follow-through, or a combination of these listed attributes. These students are not supported as the model structure allows them to fall through the cracks and underperform significantly. In this essay, I aim to discuss the “one-to-one” virtual model in its efficacy through personalized reflection. I will bring in concepts of utilitarianism, moral authority and duty, cosmopolitanism, and lastly, social justice leadership in praxis in my assessment and will further attempt to explore and respond to the ethical issues surrounding my case through three of Naomi Zack’s *Requirements for and Ethics of Race*.

Both the general problems of unjust stratification and the more specific problems of racism require an ethical address (Zack, 2012). Zack calls out the need for analysis of racial stratification and I aim to apply this address specifically to that of virtual education in the school where I teach at. In my school, there are 1,823 9th to 12th-grade students. The school itself is in an economically prosperous and rapidly growing region of North Texas, with over half of its student population belonging to White/Caucasian and Asian/Indian ethnic groups. Less than half of the school’s students belong to Black/African American, Hispanic/ Latino, Native American, and Islander ethnic groups. It is estimated that over 90% of the student population is college-bound with roughly 75% of students maintaining a 3.68 GPA or above average. The

school also consistently ranks in the top 5% of all Texas Schools in State test scores assessing student reading and math proficiency (Public School Review, 2020). These statistics shine a glaring light on the fact that the school is accustomed to having high-achieving students. These students can furthermore be considered advantaged as they perform at higher degrees and can be assumed to possess the qualities and resources that are useful when learning via the virtual model.

Through a utilitarian lens, the district likely chose my school to continue with the virtual model as they saw it as being a platform that would provide the highest degree of utility (happiness) for its students. With such a high-performing and mostly college-bound group, administrators would have assumed that this would be the best avenue to most effectively prepare students for college and their professional lives as the model is student-centered and future-focused. Utilitarianism holds that these actions taken by administrators are right in proportion as they tend to promote the greatest amount of happiness (Mill, 2017). Most of the school's student population has done incredibly well with this virtual platform, as student feedback and grade data are positive. With 75% of the student population achieving at or above a 3.68 GPA average, it can further be assumed that the majority of the school's students possess high levels of utility through an increased sense of pride, personal independence, and dignity. (Mill, 2017) Utilitarianism seeks to find the greatest amount of happiness altogether and in looking at the "one-to-one" virtual model, the school is acting to benefit the 75% majority of the school population that is succeeding currently via virtual instruction.

It is not to be said that the remaining 25% of students that fall into the lesser than a 3.68 GPA category are failures, however, as still 90% of the students at this school are projected to be college-bound. It is those who are not college-bound and those who fall below a passing average

that this model is neglecting. How can the school reach greater equity regarding those students who do not possess high levels of utility and achievement? The district is not entirely tone-deaf to this, as it is attempting to attack potential disadvantages such as inequality of resources by providing devices to students who lack them. Zack's Requirement III can be highlighted here in effect as it states:

*"Human equality must include equality of moral authority. This may require redistribution of material and social resources so that the disadvantaged can be recognized as moral equals by the advantaged."* (Zack, 2011, pg. 167).

In lending devices to students at no cost, the school is recognizing certain needs of its disadvantaged students. Justly so, as Kant's concepts of moral authority and duty call upon the school to act in justice through fairness (Zack, 2011). Distributing resources to the disadvantaged is necessary so that they can be recognized as relatively moral equals of those students who are more advantaged and be able to access the same virtual platforms as their peers. However, simply putting a device in a student's hands, does not effectively level the entire playing field. This task falls under the duty of the teachers. It is my duty as an educator to facilitate and structure the lesson appropriately so that my disadvantaged students can interact as moral equivalents to those who are advantaged. I must identify the needs of my disadvantaged students and provide extra support, attention, and direction to those who require it if I am going to attempt to achieve equity.

Moral authority, as effective moral standing, must generate rights and corresponding obligations on the part of others (Zack, 2011). Teachers cannot idle by and follow a fully utilitarian model as it's their moral authority and further duty to act in justice as fairness (Zack, 2011). Utilitarianism alone does not directly address deep inequalities; this falls to the teachers.

Teachers cannot singularly apply the greatest happiness principle to their entire student population because there will always be those students who do not fall into the majority. They must also create instruction that is mindful of the needs of minorities.

Moral authority stresses the importance of creating an atmosphere and workplace culture where teachers account for the needs of their disadvantaged students beyond what the school as an organization is doing. In assuming that all students can benefit from the virtual model, the school is acting from behind Rawls' Veil of Ignorance in which it is not deliberately known by the system who is advantaged or disadvantaged (Zack, 2011). Teachers however are in a unique position in that they are keenly aware of who their disadvantaged students are. Teachers must thus act from behind the veil to emphasize the moral authority of all participants equally so that deliberation about distributive justice might include reparations when the veil is removed (Zack, 2011). Here we can look at Zack's requirement VII:

*VII. In constructing an ethics of race, ideas of unity over groups and individuals, whether physical or spiritual, should be subject to critical empirical examination before acceptance and application: do they represent the interests of all in an egalitarian way? Or do they impose the interests of some on others through fictive "wholes" that are used to mediate the interests of those who are not being fully represented? (Zack, 2011, pg. 168)*

The "one-to-one", virtual learning concept is argued by the district to represent the interests of all its students in the most egalitarian way. The school positions virtual learning as the education model of the future, designed to put the student in charge of their learning, but when the student is disadvantaged, they are not starting from the same place as their advantaged peers. Instead, they have to overcome obstacles that others do not and break stratifications that others were never a part of. This inherently does not make the system egalitarian and imparts

fictive wholes as Zack argues, as the representation of all when it only truly represents the majority. To remedy this, teachers and school administration should apply a cosmopolitan lens to how they facilitate the virtual platform. Cosmopolitanism includes an idea of unity that accounts for those for whom life itself is tenuous (Zack, 2011). It presents an attitude toward others who exhibit differences that we might otherwise be averse to, has disdain for, or simply be content to live in ignorance of (Zack, 2011).

Cosmopolitanism requires the veil of ignorance to be lifted to ensure greater equity for disadvantaged students. Teachers should first look at the various disadvantages of their students, form a good rapport with them, and then understand more about what specific support they need. Providing paper copies of assignments and resources to students who struggle with computer use, having after or before-school help sessions for students who require individual explanation or require more structure and accountability, or giving more time and/or chunking assignments for students who have limited time or resources to work at home are examples. Cosmopolitanism requires teachers to first see and consider students for their differences and further understand how those differences might present disadvantages and then act to provide support where needed.

Lastly, I turn to Requirement X, in Zack's *Requirements for an Ethics of Race*:  
*X. New governments or revisions of existing governments should not intentionally cause those who are disadvantaged to become worse off, either in terms of material well-being or civil status; if the disadvantaged do become worse off as the result of government funding or revision, those actions should be revised. (Zack, 2011).*

In this Zack argues that governments or government institutions should not create policies that make the disadvantaged more disadvantaged. In viewing my place of work as a



government institution, I have to question if the disadvantaged students at my school are more disadvantaged now than they previously were under traditional, less-virtual, teaching methods. Traditional methods place the teacher at the center of the learning process as the teacher is doing educating through lectures or modeling. Traditional methods function off of the “I do, we do, you do” concept where the teacher demonstrates, the class practices together, and then the students individually practice. The “one-to-one” model removes the teacher and the class from the equation. The student is instead following along with the facilitated instruction online and/or conducting their own research to solve problems and answer questions. For disadvantaged students, particularly those who lack support at home and those who require personalized demonstration and attention might struggle more under this model. I have seen my lower-level learners give up before they even attempt a concept because they do not know where to start and my less-motivated students rush through assignments or just not attempt them at all because there is limited structure to ensure accountability. These students also often fall under oppressed categories in that they tend to come from lower socio-economic backgrounds and/or are racial minorities.

When it is students of already racially and/or economically oppressed groups that are struggling with the virtual model, the model is making those who are already disadvantaged worse off. In response, a serious reflection of the system needs to be done by those implementing and designing it and the structure needs to be revised. Freire’s notions of praxis and conscientização can provide a format for how the administration creating the virtual education policies can conduct this reflection. Conscientização refers to learning as perceived social, political, and economic contradictions, and encourages leaders in educational organizations to take action against the oppressive elements of reality (Furman, 2012). Freire argues personal

serious reflection must first occur, and then that reflection must expand outwards encompassing various other social dimensions. This reflection is not praxis however unless it is also combined with action to create positive change. Being conscious of our incompleteness with this self-reflection will then further lead to rigorous curiosity, motivating inquiry into how to construct inclusive and socially empathetic educational systems. Educators must work to identify the needs of disadvantaged and oppressed students and seek to transform them into equitable and inclusive policies and protocols that protect students from oppression in education (Furman, 2012). At the interpersonal level of praxis, educators can be involved in self-knowledge, critical self-reflection, and acting to transform themselves as a leader for social justice. Praxis at the extrapersonal level will then motivate educators to further know and understand systemic social justice issues and take action to address them in schools (Furman, 2012).

To conclude, further discussion into the ethics of justice and care could provide a deeper layering of analysis to the equity of the “one-to-one” model and virtual learning. John Dewey’s pragmatism could provide an ethics of justice lens into the importance of student freedoms and the concepts of growth through experience. Looking at peace education and the pedagogy of freedom would also further incorporate Freire’s ethics in education, student autonomy, and universal human ethics. Utilizing ethics of care via social readiness would also prompt interesting insight into how educators and administrators can further inspire inclusivity and equity in their policies. Lastly, analysis of student achievement in virtual education spanning over several years is needed to truly gauge the long-term success and equity of the virtual system on student groups as well as the comparison of student data before virtual education.

### References

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