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A Community Teacher Chafes at Distance Learning, Pines for her Students

Iain Guest from The Advocacy Project wrote this article from home in Newport, Rhode Island, for the [Newport online newspaper](#)



Before the lockdown: Lisa on a school outing to the Secret Garden, which raises funds for arts education. Top photo: Lisa's students admire the Maasai Girls Quilt in 2016.

I first met Lisa Olaynack, an English teacher at the [Thompson Middle School](#) in Newport in 2016, when she invited me to her class for a discussion about girls' education in Kenya.

At the time The Advocacy Project was working with the [Kakenya Centre for Excellence](#), a pioneering boarding school for Maasai girls in western Kenya that will only admit a girl if her parents reject genital mutilation. Parents were getting the message and the practice has been declining.

Kakenya's school - like the Thompson school in Newport - is a wonderful example of how local schools interact with the communities they serve. But several recent conversations with Lisa suggest that this bond may be fraying badly as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic.

I turned to Lisa partly because she and I are neighbors under lockdown and partly because she fits everyone's idea of a public school teacher - always in motion and always thinking about the welfare of her students. I told her that she reminded me of the Energizer Bunny. "Maybe" she replied, "but this bunny has a heavy heart."

The last six weeks have left Lisa feeling exhausted, anxious and inadequate. She has three children to care for at home, and a sister and brother-in-law who are battling the virus. But most of all, she is missing her students. After over twenty years of teaching at Newport schools, this is her lowest point yet.

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Lisa is one of five teachers at the Thompson School who work with a cluster of 85 students, aged 11-14. She has special responsibility for 22 of them. Like teachers around the world, she is wondering how to grade Distance Learning after six weeks of trial and error.

Some things are going better than expected. In a [thoughtful recent interview](#) Colleen Jermain, the Superintendent of Newport schools, estimated that 90% of Newport students are checking in online. This squares with Lisa's own experience. On average, nineteen of her 22 students are logging in to attend her Google classroom every morning. Lisa also agrees that after the initial "shock and awe" the technology has lost most of its terror.

Distance Learning may even help to bridge the "digital divide" between students from high and low-income families. Before the lockdown, eleven children in Lisa's cluster of 85 had no access to the Internet at home. After prodding from Gina Raimondo, the governor of Rhode Island, Cox Communications agreed to provide free WIFI to families with a student at home, and to boost the signal until July 15. Schools have also purchased devices that let students link their smart phones to computers.

Distance Learning has forced Lisa to innovate. She records herself reading a story aloud every day, interspersed with her own comments ("think aloud") and has come to rely heavily on the programs [ReadWorks](#) and [Kahoot](#), which her students love. She is currently reading from *Count Me In* by Varsha Bajaj, a sparkling book about two children who denounce a hate crime on social media. The author will read the last two chapters and chat

with Lisa's class next week. Best of all, Lisa feels a deep sense of camaraderie with the other core teachers in her clusters.

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All of this is laying the foundation for a new approach to teaching post-COVID-19. So why the heavy heart? The answer is simple - separation. Students and teachers are in mourning. "They need us and we need them," she says.

Lisa is also tormented by questions. Her students may check in but do they do the work? How is the crisis affecting single parent and undocumented families? Is Distance Learning adding to the stress? Worst of all, is the bond between her and parents damaged beyond repair?

These questions are particularly urgent because the three public schools in Newport, including Thompson, serve some of Rhode Island's neediest communities. Newport is better known for mansions than poverty, but according to [one respected survey](#) 1,698 (42%) of all children in the city live in single-parent families; 790 (23.3) live below the federal poverty threshold; a quarter need food aid; and fifty-five have a parent in prison. Scores of families are undocumented.

Lisa's cluster of 85 children at Thompson offers a mirror image of this community. About 20% of her students are high achievers, while about the same number struggle with language, learning disabilities, behavior disorders and emotional challenges.

As well as an academic education, school offers a safety net to these children and their parents. Lisa ticks off the benefits: "Nutrition (breakfast and lunch); structure, values, friendships and the chance to compete on equal terms." She is excited about the diversity in her class. When I visited, her students came from 14 countries and several Native American tribes. It hasn't changed much since then. "A bit like a mini United Nations," she said. "We love them all."

As with all teachers, this has created a bond between Lisa and her families. "They trust us and they entrust us with their children," she says. She is happy to accept the responsibility.

COVID-19 has changed this. Single mothers suddenly find themselves out of work and under lockdown with several children. Distance Learning has simply added to the stress, said Elizabeth Fuerte, who heads civic engagement for the [Newport Health Equity Zone](#), an initiative to strengthen neighborhoods. "Imagine that you are living in a single room with four kids," she said. "What chance do you have to cook, care for the kids and help them with homework?"

The crisis has not only separated teachers from parents, but changed their roles. "I hear from parents it used to be the teacher's job to teach and the parent's job to raise," said Ms Fuerte. "Now parents are doing it all, at a time when they are under so much pressure."

Language barriers add to the confusion, said Rebekah Gomez, a co-founder of Conexión Latina Newport, a grassroots organization that supports Hispanic families in the city. "The technology is difficult enough to learn if you speak English. We're asking parents to become teachers in a language they don't understand."

At school itself, physical separation has made it impossible for Lisa to monitor the progress of her students - one of her most important tasks. Before the lockdown, Lisa met with her 22 core students twice a day. This allowed her to spot problems and refer them to specialists on the staff.

Distance Learning, in contrast, gives Lisa few opportunities for live interaction with students. She holds two live Google Meets for her 85 cluster students a week and typically draws around 20, but these are opportunities to socialize rather than check up.

Without the face to face connection it is hard to tell how many students are even doing the work, let alone how well they are doing. Lisa posts assignments online at the start of each day but finds that only about half have handed in work by the end of the week. She assumed that it was her fault until she learned that colleagues were coming up with similar numbers.

Lisa does what she can to follow up. She meets regularly to compare notes with the other teachers in her cluster, and refers worries to the Dean and guidance counselors. She herself then follows up with phone calls and messages. Occasionally, she will experience a moment of "pure joy" when a parent breaks silence. But few of her calls or emails are answered.

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Looking ahead, the rougher edges of Distance Learning will no doubt get smoothed out. Grading is likely to remain a challenge, but Governor Raimondo has promised that no child will fail. With more at stake, final exams for older and graduating students could be harder.

From her own perspective, Lisa would like to see more social and emotional support for teachers, students and parents during and after the lockdown. This may be difficult, given that funding for schools will likely fall sharply with the recession, as Dr Jermain pointed out in [her podcast](#). One way to improve monitoring would be to collaborate more closely with community partners like Conexión Latina Newport, which work in the communities and know the families.

The absolute priority, says Lisa, must be the emotional needs of students. It is hard to know what impact four months of lockdown will have but Lisa herself worked for several years in juvenile justice and talks with dread about the "school to prison pipeline." Others warn of PTSD. Teachers will no doubt be on the lookout for the telltale signs - low grades, depression and acts of truancy - once the schools reopen.

And Lisa's grade for herself and Distance Learning? A pass, but only just.

