

Perspective

Deepening Divides or Inciting Change? Ongoing Impacts of COVID-19 on Teaching and Teacher Education in the United States

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Abstract: Through the lenses of teaching and teacher education, this article explores the evolving impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on education. Challenges associated with COVID-19 in schooling, learning, teaching, and teacher education are highlighted to showcase ongoing systemic inadequacies and emerging opportunities for change. Cultural assets are presented as a theoretical framework for bridging gaps between individualistic and collective approaches to learning. Specific classroom projects that foster cultural assets are connected with a larger educational movement for Ethnic Studies in public education in the United States to provide examples of ways that education can evolve in more equitable ways into the future.

Keywords: education; teacher education; COVID-19; collective action; cultural assets; ethnic studies

1. Introduction: Emergent and Ongoing Challenges in Education

The ongoing and evolving impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on public education in the United States are dramatic. The vast majority of K-12 public schools (enrolling students from ages 5–18) across the country are back to live, in-person instruction, yet the jolt felt during the months of online instruction at the outset of the pandemic continues to shake our educational system to its foundation. In some ways, the seismic impact of an immediate, unplanned, holistic transition to distance learning revealed existing structural problems in American public education [1]. In other ways, the COVID-19 pandemic exposed new challenges and opportunities that forced us all—students, teachers administrators, parents, community members, elders—to rethink the goals of education and the purpose of school [2,3]. In this paper, I attempt to explore some of these challenges and opportunities through the lenses of teaching and teacher education.

The call for this research is not solely about the COVID-19 pandemic and its lasting impacts on education. The challenges facing public education are connected to global crises including war, racism, heteronormativity, environmental destruction, and others. If education—particularly schooling for young people around the globe—is to be a force that can help bring about positive change in the years and decades to come, the root issues of these crises must be interrogated. Greed and unapologetic self-interest need to be disrupted and held accountable for the growing disparities and devastation around the globe. The cataclysmic disruption brought about by the COVID-19 pandemic is something that we must attempt to utilize as a way to rethink systemic inequities and build a more sustainable future.

It is important to note that my experiences as a student, teacher, and teacher educator are predominately focused on educational contexts in the United States. I acknowledge this as a limitation and do not claim generalizability of my analysis to other countries around the world. I also deeply believe in education as the foundation for social transformation in society and therefore I know that impacts from the COVID-19 pandemic reach far beyond borders. The changes that COVID-19 initiated will continue to impact educational systems and institutions around the globe.



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1.1. Growing Disparities

Immediate social and class divides were reinforced and intensified at the onset of the shut-downs incited by COVID-19 in March 2020. Terms like “shelter in place” and “essential worker” shone in the spotlight, and the result was a glaring look at the economic disparities that lie at the heart of our society [4]. In many ways, those with means could shelter in place; those without means were essential workers [5]. These same divides separated our young children: those from families with means were able to continue with some form of education (whether online, hybrid, or quickly back to in-person); those from families without means were often left to fend for themselves (without adequate technology and/or support from school) [6,7]. These disparities continued to grow as many school districts remained online well into 2021. And now, as public schools are predominately back to in-person instruction, it is clear that ongoing social and class disparities impact student learning [8] and mental health [9,10]. COVID-19 did not create these divides, but the ongoing impacts of the pandemic on our educational system exacerbate them.

1.2. Reliance on Remote Instruction

While the transition to online instruction was abrupt and rife with challenges in 2020, there is no doubt that its impact on education was potent. As teachers and students, we were forced to fully immerse ourselves in remote learning and in so doing saw its potential alongside its flaws. We began teaching on Zoom (and other platforms) because we had to. It was an attempt to continue teaching and learning. For the most part, we had no training for this transition. Now, over four years later, we are still utilizing remote instruction in many educational contexts—even though we don’t have to. The vast majority of K-12 public school instruction in the United States is in-person, yet we use remote options continuously—for meetings, curricular enrichment, remediation, etc. [11]. Online teaching and learning is convenient and it can provide access across distances and borders. It is, however, not a substitute for live, in-person instruction. As educators—and as citizens—we know this to be the case. There is no better way to teach and to learn than through experiences and relationships [12–14]. As a part of our educational system, technology can aid meaningful and deep learning, but it must supplement learning that takes place in the flesh. Further, training for teachers to better utilize technology remains lacking and inadequate [15–17].

1.3. Teacher Shortage

One of the ongoing impacts of this reliance on distance learning in public education in the United States is a nation-wide teacher shortage [18,19]. Put simply, young people are not choosing teaching as a profession. Many teachers retired during the challenges of the pandemic and there are not enough teachers in the pipeline to fill existing vacancies [20]. New teachers are not enrolling in teacher education programs, and the promise of a new generation of teachers who experienced the tumult of the COVID-19 pandemic as a part of their induction into the profession is fading [21]. There are many reasons for this shortage and the ongoing impacts of COVID-19 are a part of the challenges facing the profession. On a meta-level, teaching is not valued as a career in the United States. This is not new—nor is it because of COVID-19—but it is clear that teachers do not earn commensurate salaries to other professionals, their work is often regarded as daycare for children, and they often cannot afford to buy a home and live in the communities where they teach [22]. Layered on top of these structural barriers are pressures about the possibilities of online instruction and the virtual classroom replacing in-person teaching. There are few incentives encouraging young people to pursue teaching as a career and the COVID-19 pandemic has intensified this reality.

1.4. *The Need for Systemic Change*

These challenges reveal deep chasms in the public education system in the U.S. [23] that were further exposed by the COVID-19 pandemic [3]. And these ruptures continue to deepen. The system itself is under attack [24], and wealthy Americans (the vast majority of whom did not attend or send their children to public K-12 schools) are using these challenges (e.g., lack of qualified teachers, under-enrollment of students, supposed decline of academic achievement) as ammunition. However, instead of privatization (which many affluent, white Americans desire), we need substantive change and we need greater investment in the system itself. Teachers need to be recognized—and compensated—for the transformative work that they do. And young people need to see education and teaching as pathways towards a more just, equitable society and world. COVID-19 helped bring this into focus because it jolted the system so violently. It forced us to ask deep, important questions: what is school for and what is the purpose of education?

These questions need to be asked constantly and it should not take a global pandemic to bring them into focus. Yet, like so many industries, education relies on a model of social reproduction. Our public schools were not working prior to COVID-19 [25], and they are not working now [26,27]. The socioeconomic inequities that plague U.S. society are reflected and reproduced at school. We need new approaches and we need system change.

2. Existing Literature: COVID-19 Increasing Disparities or Creating Opportunities for Change?

2.1. *Structural Inequities*

As many in other settler colonies, the educational system in the U.S. was founded upon racist and assimilationist ideals. One of the most glaring examples of such ideals are the Carlisle schools—an educational system that began in the late nineteenth century and was designed to eradicate Native American culture [23,28]. Given this foundation, structural inequities are inherently a part of public education in the U.S. And there are abundant data and analyses showing the ways that these divides have developed over the decades [29–31]. In fact, Duncan-Andrade and Morrell [25] state, “urban schools are not broken, they are doing exactly what they are designed to do” (1). Our public education system benefits some, but it leaves behind many. The institution of school values and proliferates white, eurocentric norms, and the notion of meritocracy through public education is a myth [32,33]. The tumultuousness of COVID-19 highlighted these inequities and, as discussed above, brought new examples of ways in which the system itself exacerbated discrepancies about who has access to quality education in this country. Students from affluent families who attend private schools had access to necessary technologies during the transition to online learning, their parents were able to work from home, and, in most cases, these students returned to in-person school sooner than their public-school counterparts [34,35]. Students from working-class families had more difficulty accessing necessary technology during lockdown, their parents were more likely to be working, and these students missed significant amounts of in-person instruction between 2020 and 2022 [36].

2.2. *Individualism*

One foundational aspect of U.S. public schooling that perpetuates the inequities described above is a focus on solitary achievement and success [37]. That is, the curriculum, assessment, and overall approach to teaching and learning in school is viewed through a lens of individualism [23]. While teachers and students might have different perspectives about the purposes of education, measurable results are purely attributed to the individual. These results range from informal, in-class assessments to state-mandated, summative exams. This focus on independent matriculation through the system is not necessarily unique to U.S. public schooling, but, given the diverse cultural experiences of students, it is a glaring inconsistency in many communities [38]. Many students from working-class communities of Color have deep roots in collectivist cultural identities [39,40]. Families live together as multigenerational units with shared traditions, responsibilities, and goals. These

traits and ways of being are not only squandered by a schooling system that negates their capital, but placed at odds with a mindset that values individual success over community connectivity.

The COVID-19 pandemic—and its ongoing impacts on society and education—heightened the tensions between individualistic pursuits and community sustenance. For example, remote instruction changed the very nature of classroom learning from a social to a solitary experience. Yes, a Zoom classroom has a small picture of each participant’s face on the screen; however, the experience itself involves an individual and a computer. This reality highlights the idea that education is a personal endeavor. And, when combined with the realities described above involving access, remote instruction increased class disparities for public school students in the U.S. As such, the gaps between school learning (presumably online) and home learning (family and close-knit groups “sheltering in place” together) widened.

3. Theoretical Framework: Cultural Assets and a View towards Change

Important theoretical contributions can help provide a foundation upon which a more collective model of education can be built. At the core of my analysis is a belief in education as a catalyst for change. As a teacher, I view theories as sets of ideas that help me to make sense of the world around me. As a scholar, I attempt to utilize and build upon theories that can help initiate change in the field of education. Freire’s [41] approach to education for liberation is foundational in my analysis here, as it explores the very purpose of education. Education is about freedom. Education is for people and communities, and it exists in dialogue between learners (students and teachers alike). Freire’s notion of “reading the word to read the world” suggests that literacy, for example, is about action and involvement. As such, education more generally is about learning for the sake of being engaged as a citizen. For Freire, and, I believe, for educators today, civic engagement means fighting for change so that oppressed communities have access to the resources they deserve. Education is a vital tool in this quest.

As a theoretical framework built upon the foundations of education for liberation [41], cultural assets are shared, inter-generational ways of being that identify and sustain communities and their members [2]. Like culture itself, these assets are fluid: they are traits and traditions, and they are also beliefs and sensibilities. They are enacted and they are relational [42]. Cultural assets are interconnected and reciprocal, and they serve as tools for community members to navigate within and across cultural contexts in spite of systemic hierarchies and injustices.

Bilingualism, for example, can be a valuable cultural asset. From the periphery it may be seen simply as the ability to speak two languages. However, when viewed through a more critical, sociocultural perspective [43], bilingualism—particularly in many historically targeted communities in the U.S.—represents intergenerational communication and connection. It purposefully rejects monolingual norms and assumptions about citizenship and being American [44,45]. And it is an act of resistance in a society whose educational system solely values English [37]. Thus, as an example, bilingualism can be a cultural asset that is both an idea and an action—a noun and a verb.

When connected to cultural assets as a larger theoretical framework, bilingualism can be seen as an important navigational tool—especially for younger generations who often bear the burden of linguistic barriers across family, community, and educational contexts [46]. There are decades of research revealing the intricacies of bilingualism [47], its impacts on sociocultural and academic outcomes [48–50], and its role in keeping families and communities connected [43]. When viewed as a potent intergenerational asset, bilingualism is a tool for liberation—it connects communities and provides opportunities for action and engagement across cultural contexts.

As a theoretical framework, this perspective of cultural assets is also built upon existing conceptual contributions that honor the lived experiences of working-class communities of Color in the U.S. Community cultural wealth [51] is a framework that adapts critical race theory to showcase the multiple forms of intersectional capital employed within and across communities. These forms of capital exemplify the connectivity of communities and the ways that structural racism is resisted. As such, community cultural wealth [51] is an important counter-narrative to the often assumed, deficit-laden perspectives of communities of Color in the U.S. [24,28,43]. As stated earlier, public education is complicit in the reproduction of these perspectives, so theoretical contributions like cultural assets and community cultural wealth are presented as ways to connect conceptual understandings with pedagogical practices. That is, education—particularly the K-12 public school classroom—must be a catalyst for systemic change in education. Connecting pedagogy and curriculum through a theoretical approach that elevates the lived experiences of students, their families, and their communities, is one way to do so. This can be the start of bridging the gap between the individual and the collective in education.

4. Discussion: Future Directions and Envisioning a More Collective Educational System

Given the history of a system plagued by inequity, and the stressors of contemporary challenges like teacher shortages and learning gaps, the jolt of the COVID-19 pandemic is a clear call for change [2,3]. We cannot continue on a pre-determined pathway in American public education—a system supposedly designed for all students—that serves some and fails others. We cannot pursue the status quo when we no longer have a teaching force. And we cannot overlook the deep impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic.

There is no doubt that the challenges facing public education in the U.S.—historic and current—paint a stark picture. These are very difficult times. Further, the desperation of these times reflects larger challenges in our society and around the globe: increasing wealth and health disparities, violence, political polarization, war, structural racism, climate destruction, etc. The COVID-19 pandemic revealed and exacerbated some of these forces and exposed new realities of an inter-connected global community. Taken together, perhaps one of the biggest calls to action in the field of education is one for substantive, foundational change—a paradigm shift.

4.1. Exploring New Possibilities: Looking in and Moving out

One of the steps necessary in the movement towards a sea change in education involves personal reflection and interrogation. Certainly for me—someone who is a product of K-16 public education in the U.S., a long-time classroom teacher, and currently a teacher educator—this reflection involves an acceptance of my own complicity in the failures of our educational system. I believe deeply in American public education and I have dedicated my entire professional career (over 25 years) to helping educate youth and aspiring teachers in our country. Yet, I am part of a generation that has failed as educators (just like we as a generation, for example, have failed to maintain a sustainable climate).

Accepting this failure does not mean that the journey has not been worth it, advances have not been made, or our educational system is doomed. It also does not involve nostalgically looking back to times when public education was flourishing [23]. It is a system with inherent flaws and it continues to evolve. The ongoing impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic have pushed us to a point where we can no longer continue teaching and learning in the same ways we have been doing so, and one of the first steps in making this change is acknowledging our own roles in this current reality. For me, as a teacher, I need to question my own understandings of how and why I teach. I need to accept that the way I learned in school is not necessarily the way that my students learn. I need to try to move out of the way so that young people have more space to share their experiences, interact with one another, and collectively explore, envision, and enact new possibilities for teaching and learning.

There are different ways that I can try to accomplish some of these actions—many of which I know I do not yet recognize. For now, I must read and learn about different theoretical and pedagogical approaches from new media sources and fields of study. I must engage in dialogue with new and different educators from multiple disciplines. I must teach new material in my courses—read new texts, explore new media, create new content. I must re-envision my own pedagogy to create more space for reflection, dialogue, community-building, and collective action. Perhaps, most of all, as a teacher committed to change, I must listen—really listen—to students. Taken together, these are things—conceptual and practical—that I can try to do in order to move out of the way so that young people (my students) can begin to take over. And, if they can begin to take over in our classroom space, it is my hope and belief that they will take over in spaces beyond school.

4.2. Learning from Our Collectivistic Communities

This sense of hope in future generations is not simply an optimistic view about the power of education. In fact, the will of young people is—and always will be—the most potent force to incite large-scale social change in society. Therefore, it becomes our task as educators to make room for youth to develop, share, and implement the stages of this systemic change. Through the cultural assets framework discussed earlier in this paper, I believe that there is a foundation upon which we can build sites for radical change. The fostering of cultural assets does not rely on traditional teaching methods or standardized curricula. Instead, it focuses on the cultural experiences of young people, their families, and their communities. It is a possible foundation for a theoretical and pedagogical stance that turns the classroom into a space in which students can explore the connections between the cultural worlds they inhabit—at home, in their communities, online, and at school.

4.3. Models and Movements in Schools

Nurturing students' cultural assets must happen in multiple places in a school community (and beyond). It can start in the classroom (as discussed above), and ideally it is something that seeps into other spaces (clubs, activities, projects, etc.) and helps shape school community. My work with colleagues [52,53] portrays some of the ways that teachers have designed, developed, and implemented curricular and pedagogical innovations focused on students' cultural assets. More specifically, these innovations were created amidst the tumultuousness of the COVID-19 pandemic, and were attempts to provide opportunities for young people to share their experiences with one another, family members, and teachers. For example, young students interviewed family and community elders to learn about their histories as a way to develop coping strategies and support systems during lock-down [52]. Middle school students wrote about and then shared their own personal stories about transitioning from remote instruction back to in-person learning, and how it felt to connect with peers after months of isolation [53]. And high school students produced a podcast in which they interviewed other youth from across the city to explore some of the challenges and opportunities facing adolescents during lock-down [52].

These are just a few examples from classrooms in California, where I get to work with teachers. It is important to note that these examples showcase ways in which teachers view students' lived experiences as vital and valuable aspects of the classroom curriculum. At the center of each of these projects are the students themselves. Additionally, students' thoughts and feelings about the pandemic—and its impact on their lives—matter. Further, these projects require interaction and discussion. There is nothing solitary or individualistic about the product or the process of these activities, and therefore, these projects showcase the shared and collective experiences of young people. This is vital because it not only pushes against traditional individualistic assumptions about schoolwork, but it honors and cultivates the community cultural wealth of students and their families.

4.4. *Ethnic Studies*

It is also important that these classroom and curricular projects designed to nurture students' cultural assets are connected with larger movements in education. One such movement is the push for Ethnic Studies. In 2020, California passed Assembly Bill 101 to adapt Ethnic Studies as a high school requirement [54]. All public-school students will be required to complete an Ethnic Studies course by the year 2030. Ethnic Studies is an interdisciplinary exploration of race, culture, ethnicity, and the experiences of historically marginalized and targeted communities in the United States [54,55]. The movement for Ethnic Studies began in the 1960s as communities of Color demanded access to higher education, representation in academic roles, and school curricula that included the experiences and contributions of working-class and immigrant communities [56,57]. The goals of Ethnic Studies are decolonization and the elimination of racism [58].

At its foundation, Ethnic Studies is a movement. It is an ongoing collective action to teach an accurate history of the United States for the purposes of creating a more just and equitable future. Through seeing themselves (and their communities) in the curriculum, learning about social movements and resistance as a part of the fabric of the country, and critiquing the eurocentric version of history that is normalized in traditional texts, students recognize their own experiences as being connected to something much larger than themselves. The collective, intergenerational identities that many young people experience at home and in their communities are fostered as a part of Ethnic Studies [58]. Students build community with one another, see across difference, and engage in social and political action to bring about change [54]. It is this connection to a larger, collective movement that inspires hope for Ethnic Studies to deeply impact the next generation of leaders.

5. Conclusions

The impacts of a movement like Ethnic Studies are burgeoning. The fact that California will require all public students to take an Ethnic Studies course and learn about historical contributions of communities of Color is a step forward. Further, the idea that public school curricula will showcase counternarratives, acts of resistance, and intergenerational movement-building inspires hope for learning about the collective possibilities alive amidst the cultural assets of young people and their families. In no way is Ethnic Studies a silver bullet—much work lies ahead. The idea that Ethnic Studies courses will provide spaces for dialogue about contentious topics is a vital aspect of the movement. Immigration and border crossing are foundational American experiences and they need to be central in school curricula—in accurate, honest, and critical ways.

The fact that a required Ethnic Studies course was signed into law during the height of the COVID-19 lock-down shows that the impact of the pandemic was seismic. As our entire educational system was reeling from an immediate shift to online learning, movement-building was happening. In reality, the jolt from the pandemic continues to bring about change. Some of these changes are highlighted in this paper: heightened inequities, shifts towards online learning, teacher shortages, learning loss, isolation, etc. These changes pose significant challenges and provide important opportunities. Perhaps the biggest opportunity is recognizing the ongoing impacts of the pandemic on our daily lives and resisting the urge to return to some type of normality or life before COVID-19. This is not possible.

In education, the impacts of the pandemic will continue to showcase ways that our system has always been flawed and how we must seek something new. There is no doubt that COVID-19 inflicted (and continues to inflict) tremendous suffering. We need to acknowledge this suffering and also see part of it as a catalyst for change. We need to work together—in education and in society—to adapt to a new reality that the COVID-19 pandemic helped to create. Perhaps one place to start building a new, more equitable future is to help create space for young people to work together, learn from one another, embrace their cultural identities, and see collective action as a shared goal. Schools and education can play a part in this and we need to embark on this journey now.

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