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*All contributions to this issue have undergone peer-review.

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A Manifesto for Schools
Post-COVID

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Given that many teachers and administrators have found this current school year more difficult than the last;

Given the existence of a teacher shortage, a substitute teacher shortage, and accelerating rates of teacher retirement;

Given a decade-long decline in the number of students entering teacher preparation programs;

Given that many children and adolescents have lost the stamina that allowed them to attend school for seven or more hours a day, five days a week, for forty or more weeks a year;

Given increasing rates of depression and anxiety among young people;

Given that human happiness is greatly supported by high-quality sleep, food, and exercise; and

Given that human happiness is greatly supported by a sense of belonging and social acceptance—

Public schools should move to adopt the following measures with all due speed:

Active instruction in the core academic subjects—mathematics, the language arts, the social studies, and the sciences—should be limited to three hours a day.

The fine arts—the making of music; the practice of drawing and painting; the enjoyment of beautiful objects; the telling of stories—are a source of pleasure and can no longer be denied to anyone in our public schools. They should be experienced on a daily basis.

The joys of physical movement and bodily health are inherent goods that also support rigorous mental activity. They should be practiced, repeatedly, on a daily basis.

Board games teach children how to win and lose with grace. Games such as chess, backgammon, and scrabble should be taught and played in schools.

Outdoor play, both organized and unorganized, should occupy at least two hours of the school day.

Religious and spiritual practices are connected to human flourishing. Schools can and should support such practices.

The school day should respect the sleep needs of adolescents; core academic instruction should not commence prior to 9 am.

The schools should serve healthy foods that are prepared on-site.

Teachers and students should have one hour to eat lunch. Ideally, teachers and students would eat lunch in the same space. In this way, students might have an example of what a meal shared among friends, in conversation, without devices, might entail.

Access to bathrooms should not be restricted to teachers and students for any reason. Bathrooms should be clean, well-stocked with personal care items, and provide privacy for teachers and students alike.
Teachers should devote no more than 25 hours of their week to planning and carrying out classroom instruction. Assessment activities—such as the imperative to closely attend to data on the abilities, needs, and growth of individual students—requires more time than currently allotted.

Teachers should hold daily office hours to ensure that additional help and support can be offered to any student who needs it.

Grades should be abolished and replaced with rigorous, honest, and helpful feedback from teachers.

In an era of flexible and hybrid scheduling, the distinction between “school work” and “homework” is no longer helpful. That said, a forty-hour workweek should be the expectation for teachers and students alike. This will mean that a student’s required work ends when the school days ends—with due acknowledgement that powerful school instruction may inspire students to want to go on learning after the school day has finished.

Schools should accept that one important function they serve is childcare, thereby allowing working parents a safe place to leave their children at no cost. Therefore, the hours of the school should match the working hours of the majority of working adults. At a minimum, schools should be open for students from 9 am to 5 pm, with specified times within that period for compulsory attendance.

Schools should no longer close for inclement weather. As long as parents are going to work, schools should remain open for whomever can attend.

Adolescents need not be supervised at all times and should be trusted to make good decisions.

High school students deserve the right to learn important life skills in addition to core academics. High school should be a place where you learn to drive, to cook, and to manage personal finances.

High school students should, upon successful completion of a Civics course, be given the right to vote in all local, state, and national elections.

The distinction between core, elective, and extra-curricular activities should be abolished. Anything that promotes human growth and genuine happiness is appropriate for the school day.

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Many of these proposals are already in place in some of our best schools, or at some particular age level—pre-K, elementary, middle, or high school. While none of these proposals would, in and of themselves, address the massive inequity present in the American school system, they would contribute towards a humanization of the system that would improve the everyday lives of teachers and students alike.

COVID has revealed to us the depths of our collective alienation and the levels of dehumanization in our schools, for teachers and students alike.
Two Arced Fishes and a Raven’s Eye: Thoughts on Selfies, Pandemics, and a Door, Ajar

David W. Jardine
Preamble: Two Arced Fishes

Sometimes
Selfies betray arced fishes.
Imaginaries
Far more bright and brilliant than the imaging self’s self-regard.

Unbeknownst. Face-darkening.
Swum behind one’s back.
It’s how to write, I’ve heard
Tell. Eyecast
Back and around
To what got meant
Even if I didn’t sense I meant it. Even if I didn’t mean it.

Arced fishes
Betraying a giveaway
Right when,
Could be especially when
I thought it was just me.

Collective Stress Disorder

Animals under various forms of threat—the continuous presence of predators, lack of adequate food, drought, and the like—tend to play less and less. They tend, quite naturally, to revert to those kinds of activities that will aid them in gaining comparative control over their environment, activities that involve little or no risk. They revert, so to speak, to what is tried and true, what is most familiar.1

Finding out what we have imagined to be most tried and true and most familiar, isn’t necessarily a “plain clean gift.”2 Like all opportunities to find out:

they trail dark and chaotic attachments to their unknown backgrounds, luring us further. One insight leads to another; one invention suggests another variation; more and more seems to press through the hole, and more and more we find ourselves drawn out into a chaos of possibilities.3

Right here is the pedagogical obligation: finding ourselves thus pressed requires deliberation, parsing, thinking, studying, remembering, searching, writing, listening, reading, scholarship, if we are to avoid simply being swept up in this roil.

The temptation to be swept up and feel the temporary exhilaration of getting nothing more than “aroused,” has become almost de rigeur, fashionable, customary, and ordinary. After all, under the long, lingering, diffuse “threat” of COVID-19, what can easily get stirred up is long-buried ideas, anxieties, knee-jerks, trigger-fingers, unspoken prejudices, unuttered presumptions, long-forgotten, mixed, and contested histories, justices and injustices, all housed down inside the moist underbellies of consciousness.

And these things can easily pile themselves upon smoky skies from unprecedented fires, flagpoles used to break windows, knees on necks, fake news about fake news, nameless buried children,4 and on and on. Things going on

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3 Hillman, “Notes on Opportunism,” 94.
inside me lurked just out of sight of awareness, things I tend to think and act with but not necessarily about.

Fishes swum in the dark.

We are all getting reflected back to ourselves from beyond our self’s often-suppressed or unnoticed or atrophied self-confidences. Glimpses of “what happens to us beyond our wanting and doing.” We, as the old saw goes, can easily and unwittingly “project” our trepidations upon anything that seems even slightly “other” than the familiar. The anxieties of COVID-19, in particular, might cause us to just want things back to the way they were, no questions asked.

I’m tired. We’re all tired.

Too bad. Teaching and learning isn’t easy. Questions need to be asked. There is a door, ajar. Again, pedagogy rings at the heart of finding and in light of being a former asthmatic events and in light of being a former asthmatic as a child—breathing room in such matters.

Okay, stop. Breathe a moment. Where is that citation? Here:

Unwholesome mental formations are like a tangled ball of string. When we try to untangle it, we only wind it around ourselves until we cannot move. These mental formations are sometimes called afflictions kleshas. Sometimes they are called obscurations because they confuse us and make us lose our way.

Thank you. I don’t say that often enough to these teachers whose words dwell near me and help me out. One small reason for scholarship is finding comfort—common strength—to help lift up my own frailties into something more airborne, a suffering that is lighter, more liveable, more companionable. Again, a pedagogical image of the meeting of the old and the new, the established and the arising, the ancestral and the new baby born. An aside, that my wife and I, all things being well, just might be grandparents in a few days of this writing, August 2, 2021, due date August 6. One more reason to keep reading, keep writing.

So, there is a phenomenon, here, that I would always caution my student-teachers about. In their practicum placements, there will always be a little worry of this, a larger one over that, there’s another, another that, and that, and that—these tend to coalesce into what I half-jokingly named “collective stress disorder” where the sense of threat, disturbance, anxiety, frustration or exhaustion of all of these collectively can come down upon the head of any one of them and make my actions and reactions exaggerated, inappropriate and monstrous.

Ivan Illich almost playfully names the inflaming and exaggerating urge in these matters a sort of “apocalyptic randiness”—basically framed, “I have an even more horrible example to tell you! Let’s imagine an even worse situation!” , spoken or written with a sort of energizing, arousing, inciting, conspiratorial glee coupled with a strange tinge of superiority, distain, and moral indignation. This, of course, is reminiscent of school staffroom conversations: “You think that kid is


6 Ivan Illich & David Cayley, Ivan Illich in Conversation, 127.
trouble? A couple of years ago, I had a kid in my class who . . .

When speaking of apocalyptic randiness, [Ivan] Illich also warns of falling prey to its opposite, Romanticism, where, with equal exaggeration, simplification, and thoughtlessness, one sees good news everywhere.

Our panic-reacting gripping onto things creates reifications towards which one then becomes hostile. And, again, the more we grip, the greater the grip we are in:

Like trying to grab cornstarch dissolved in water, the faster and harder and more desperately we try to seize these matters and cling to something hard and permanent the more substantial they feel and the more is aggravated our desire to grip even tighter.

The result of this gripping work is a “Titanic mind-set,” caught up in what Edward Said calls the “vocabulary of giantism and apocalypse [Literacy! Accountability! High-Stakes Testing! Falling Behind! A Parent’s Right to Know!] each use of which is plainly designed not to edify but to inflame.”

Utterly embarrassing for me to read. Things written years ago and still I fall prey. Stop. Still yourself. Untangle first. Always a good idea. Otherwise, we lose our way. I lose my way.

“A Consciousness that Must Leave the Door Ajar”

Interpretation [the hermeneutic root-gesture of pedagogical untangling] is focused . . . both on the entrance of the young/ the initiate into the world and upon the restoration and renewal of the world that can ensue from such entrance. As with the figure of Hermes, interpretation stands at this portal, constituted by “a consciousness that must leave the door ajar,” ready for the arrival of the “new blood” (the next teacher’s/ principal’s/ child’s/ student-teacher’s tale) that will not be left to its own devices, but will help transform the world and make it new.

Restoration and renewal.

The arrival of these moments of stilling can be great gifts, hard to handle. The good news is that the bad news, here, can be good news—it forces my hand, shows me my patience, compose, trust, paranoia, exhaustion, suspicions. Our circumstances, as teachers, as students beckons our careful attention. COVID-19 has been a terribly passive and patient teacher along with all its collective surroundings of stress and strain. It shows me how easily I can be preyed upon by click-baits. How easily I can discover how I’ve been entrenched, how I’ve forgotten what my work is after all these years. Discover, as David Loy put it, that I have, we have “bound ourselves

9 Ivan Illich & David Cayley, Ivan Illich in Conversation, 127.
12 C.A. Bowers, Transitions: Educational Reforms that Promote Ecological Intelligence or the Assumptions Underlying Modernity?
15 Hillman, “Notes on Opportunism,” 98.
This trick is age-old. It shows me that it would be so easy to simply revert to the old saw of what’s “tried and true.”

The door is ajar, the opportunity at hand, of rethinking schooling, of releasing ourselves from its pent-up fears and worn-out inheritances and prejudices and presumptions. But equally on hand is the threat-based, knee-jerk, unthought “idea” of simply “getting back to normal.”

“If It Actually Exists, it Must be Possible”

Whenever you get into this kind of discussion, one of the first things you are charged with from some corner is that “well, you want to go backwards.” So, you have to answer it over and over again, but still people keep raising it. Jerry Brown asked me the same question in a discussion about three weeks ago; he said, “You’re going against the grain of things all the time, aren’t you?” I said, “it’s only a temporary turbulence I’m setting myself against. Living close to earth, living more simply, living more responsibly, are all quite literally in the grain of things.” It’s coming back to us one way or another, like it or not... [It is] not a preaching but... a demonstration hidden within... deeper harmonies and deeper simplicities, which are essentially sanities, even though they appear irrelevant, impossible, behind us.¹⁸

It’s coming back to us one way or another.

This is what can happen if the anxious, mindless rushing of schooling gets interrupted. There is a lot of talk about the vital need for kids to get back to school because of how important it is. I agree. But it need not be the same old efficiency-model, panic-based acceleration, and exhaustion. What we’ve witnessed is that there is no necessity to the things we have been doing, only the often-numbing weight of what we’ve inherited.

One of the most pernicious and intransigent and most deeply buried falsehoods squirming around with those fishes is that schools as they are contemporarily often constituted—the ones we want to “get back to”—are simply “the real world”:

Hence the gasps of recognition (my own included) and that weird moment of realizing that what seemed to be just “the way things are” in the world of schools is in fact nothing of the sort. We are not dealing with “the real world” [“the normal” we long to get back to]... Rather, we are dealing with how the world of schools happened to have turned out—once it is fashioned after the model of efficient industrial assembly, with the control, surveillance, acquiescence, and obedience it requires. To understand [the opportunity in front of us in this COVID-19 interregnum]... a weird sort of spell must be broken. A cautionary note, however. Breaking free of this spell can lead to an experiential onrush of the great abundance of the world. But it also leads me to experience my own poverty regarding my knowledge of what, now, to do in the face of this reality.¹⁹

Schools, “normal” schools, can cleave towards “a demonstration hidden within... deeper harmonies and deeper simplicities,” ones more in line the etymologies of that word “school” itself. Consider this: School, Latin schola, “leisure for learning.” Greek skhole, originally “a holding back, a keeping clear.”²⁰ This is what can happen if the frantic forward push of our living gets

²⁰ See http://www.etymonline.com, entry under “school.”
paused. This is the terrible, tough, pedagogical gift that COVID-19 has offered us.

Schooling will always be difficult and hard work no matter how you do it. Finding a way into the re-emergent harmonies and simplicities of the abundant relations of living disciplines and living fields of relations, human and more-than-human, is at least a difficulty that bears with it the potential of repeated uprisings of great relief and joy:

I am not sure I have much more to say that hasn't been already said over and over again by so many. The complex and difficult insights of ecological alertness are known and have been for aeons. The complex and difficult insights of how education might shape itself in light of this alertness has been well documented in recent decades. Witness the papers in this collection. Witness how those referred to have their own family trees listed. Follow them, too. Find your way. It's a lush, tough field. I've witnessed dozens of schools where these matters of teaching and learning and curriculum ecologically imagined are accepted and practiced.

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After all, it is not as if curriculum guides don't describe living fields of knowledge, locales, places, terrains wont of attention and affection. The invitation is lying nearby, right on-hand. The theory has become well-wrought and is burgeoning with new stings and insight as we speak. The practices have been well-documented. But, as per Bill Callahan, "God's face on the water, though plain to see, it's still hard to read."22

There we are. Learning to read, all over again.

I recall, for example, the utterly strange example of the following list that was common at the beginning of the pandemic, about what to think of this, about what to do, to understand, to study, to remember, to lament. All of these are no longer live links, but these are the actual titles given to the online stories. This is a very small sample:

- Spreads of lions laying on warm paved roads in South Africa
- Sea turtles thriving on empty Florida beaches
- Wild goats taking over Welsh towns
- Squirrels taking over Santa Monica parks
- Sheep wandering golf courses in England
- Wild boars on the streets of Barcelona
- Shoals of fish back in bluer and clearer canals of Venice
- Europe breathing fresher air
- Nitrogen Dioxide levels plunging in northern China

This should give pause to the rush to get back to an unthought, knee-jerk “normal” when placed alongside Gary Snyder’s insistences (see above) about the grain of things: This pandemic, and all the sundry surrounding panic-based, media-overkill-click-bait-based hysterics hopefully have allowed moments of pause, because the rich and abundant fields of relations that house us and that are entrusted to teachers and students in schools are simply awaiting us. And I have to remind myself not to get caught up in the warmth of that list, because it now must include current California fires and unprecedented New York/New Jersey floodings and deaths and damage. Reminders, all. Teachers.

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21 Referring here to a special issue of a special issue of the Journal of the Canadian Association for Curriculum Studies 18, no. 2, "Walking: Attuning to an Earthly Curriculum," https://icaes.journals.yorku.ca/index.php/icaes. See also the previous issue of this journal, and so many other classroom examples with their rigors and delights and difficulties.


23 David W. Jardine, What We Know Full Well,” Journal of the Canadian Association for Curriculum Studies 18, no. 2: 38.
Make no mistake, then. This is no Romantic joyride. This work often burns. One’s new students, in many cases, are already well-schooled in being schooled, and have been taught to not be taught this way:

Hence the echoes we hear in David G. Smith’s chilling statement of a commonplace in which we are all variously implicated: “Tell me exactly what it is you want in this assignment.” Even more chilling is how this echoes a June 4th, 1906 lecture by Fredrick Winslow Taylor, the “father” of what came to be known as the efficiency movement. Taylor was, in a sense, hired to make American schools more efficient by replicating his work in industrial assembly: “In our scheme we do not ask for the initiative of our men. We do not want any initiative. All we want of them is to obey the orders we give them, do what we say, and do it quickly.”

And, let’s face it, surrounding circumstances and panics and presumptions and parental worries and arced fishes are not necessarily working in our favor towards favouring exploring abundant, living fields of relations as a way to proceed.

Working this way is not easy. It is not quick. And, in our current circumstances, it might seem like an emergency. So here is a soft reminder that we have companions in these matters:

This can’t be hurried; this is the dreadful situation that young people are in [that, in fact, we are all in]. The situation you’re in is a situation that is going to call for a lot of patience, and to be patient in an emergency is a terrible trial. The important thing to do is to learn all you can about where you are, to make common cause with that place, and then, resigning yourself, become patient enough to work with it over a long time. And then, what you do is increase the possibility that you’ll make a good example. And what we’re looking for in this is good examples.25

It is laborious, but it is good labor, honorable labor for teachers and students alike. To rigorously seek out the threads, the connections, the details, to push back against the tendencies to fragment, to trivialize, to accelerate, is tough work in which we need to find comfort — common strength, as goes the etymology — in each other.

But again, don’t get light-headed, here. There was a study done involving 26 elementary and secondary schools, 12,800 students in Alberta, Canada, that demonstrated that following the ways that a disciplinary, living field of knowledge is practiced instead of the old industrial model of schooling lead to markedly higher performances on Provincial Standardized Tests.26 I gave this study to a principal who dismissed it out-of-hand, saying “we just don’t have time for that sort of stuff.” My dear colleagues and co-authors, Patricia Clifford and Sharon Friesen, and I used to call this “the old list of yeah-buts”...

Up against the too often pronounced exhaustion and desperation and despair of “this sort of thing is not possible in my school/with my sort of students/in this part of town/at this grade level/with this school administration/in this school board/in this subject area/with these parents/under these economic conditions,” and so, on and on, we offer an old and pointed response of our late colleague, teacher and friend, Patricia...

Clifford: "if it actually exists, it must be possible."  

An Old, Familiar Face

Perception of opportunities requires a sensitivity given through one’s own wounds. Here, weakness provides the kind of hermetic, secret perception critical for adaptation to situations. The weak place serves to open us to what is in the air. We feel through our pores which way the wind blows. We turn with the wind; trimmers. An opportunity requires . . . a sense . . . which reveals the daimon of a situation. The daimon of a place in antiquity supposedly revealed what the place was good for, its special quality and dangers. The daimon was thought to be a familiaris of the place. To know a situation, one needs to sense what lurks in it.

This is the lesson I carried into all those university classes I taught and into those school classrooms where I ventured with student-teachers and on my own in friendships with teachers in schools, in graduate classes, and so on. The open door is everywhere. Every topic is a potential clue, a possible hint. Every topic listed in every curriculum guide is the centre of an elaborate and elaborate-able and venture-able field of living relations. Opening up those fields for our students—for ourselves as well—is at the heart and in the grain of things pedagogical.

As a general pronouncement, this can seem simply overwhelming and chaos-inducing and Romantic and unrealistic and frightening and woozy and all that. It can also seem subjective and “letting kids do what they want” chaos and so on.

It is none of these. These, too, are knee-jerks that are understandable if you have not experienced and witnessed this sort of pedagogy. What is always needed to make it a viable, practicable matter, is a good example of “a demonstration hidden” always nested here and here and here.

So here we go, an old, familiar familiaris squat on the back railing, a frequent visitor, utterly easy to ignore or let glide by.

Normal.

“Right here, where it, where it seems impossible that one life even matters” comes the moment that teachers understand on their good days, and students, too, when something heretofore simply fly-by stops

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and stills us into stopping and stilling and whiling. Just imagine, for a moment, the multiple stories to be told, the new stories to be ventured, photos to be taken, feathers to be microscoped and drawn by hand, Latin etymologies of *Corvus corax*, myriad cultural depictions—more stories than could be read in a lifetime, the sciences of flight, the details of habitats, of territoriality, the analogies of this to tribes and political allegiances. Lifespan (10-15 years). Wingspans (100-150 centimetres). Typologies. Kinds. Relations. Linnaeus’s branching work. Relations: Jays, Crows, Magpies.

Monogamous, this picture being one of a pair that has been around for quite a while.

My wife and heard they were nesting nearby, and the neighbours saw four little heads popping up. We thought of how cute it might be if the parents brought the kids over to our feeder. Well, they did, full grown, loud, boisterous, each vying for position, chasing others away, pecking and yakking. We knew they were territorial, so we knew, sooner or later, the “kids” would disperse. We took the feeder down temporarily and mom and dad have, for now, returned.

Whiling over this and all its adjacent fields of relations is itself an extraordinary “normality” that is commonplace as can be. We can all recognize it from those times where something of “interest” (Latin root, *inter* and -*esse*, essentially, “being in the middle of something”) has grabbed our attention and our attention deepens as we continue to explore. This is not some sort of subjective, touchy-feely flight of fancy made up on the spot, this idea of whiling and the time it takes. It is a deeply scholarly matter. It is a matter that teachers will recognize when something “clicks” in their classroom and students start, so to speak, “leaning in” towards the object fluttering open before their eyes:

It is not merely one’s "taking time" to linger over something, as in the slackening or slowing down to contemplate. [This whiling] temporality . . . is not a function of lackadaisical, meandering contemplation, least of all passive in any way, but is a function of the fullness and intensity of attention and engrossment.30 (Ross 2006, p. 109)

We become enthralled and "enveloped in a time that does not pass,"31 a time described by Hans-Georg Gadamer with the German term *Verweilen*—translatable as "tarrying" or "whiling" or "gathering."32

In this tarrying the contrast with the merely pragmatic realms of understanding becomes clear. The *W*eile [the “while” in *Verweilen*, tarrying] has this very special temporal structure—a structure of being moved, which one nevertheless cannot describe merely as duration. In it we tarry.33

This possibility of, shall we say, "absorption" and being moved and addressed and, shall we say, summoned or beckoned by the work itself, is phenomenologically familiar. When the work undertaken is worthwhile, the inquiry, the topic, the images, the ideas, the story truly takes hold of us. It is not an object that stands opposite us which we look at in hope of seeing through it to an intended conceptual meaning. Just the reverse. The work is an *Ereignis*—an event that “appropriates us” into itself. It jolts us, it knocks us over, and sets up a world of its own, into which we are drawn, as it were.34

Difficult to grasp, but the irony is that it is worth taking the time to think about and study this temporality that teachers already understand when a group of students get taken hold of by a

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31 Ross, “The Temporality of Tarrying in Gadamer,” 106.
34 Gadamer, *Conversation*, 71.
topic, and idea, an image, a story, a mathematical diagram. We know this from our own lives as well, this weird uplift. We can all find it in ourselves when we linger over something that opens our hearts, sparks our ideas, in which we find companions who also love this place, this thing, this idea, this field, old ancestors found lingering there with advice and warnings and details. The work of art or words of a student that brought me to a halt on day. Beautiful things:

And the Raven, never flitting, still is sitting, still is sitting.  
Or this from the Prose Edda chapter entitled, “Gylfaginning: Here Begins the Beguiling of Gylfi”:

The ravens sit on [Odin’s] shoulders and say into his ear all the tidings which they see or hear; they are called thus: Huginn and Muninn. He sends them at day-break to fly about all the world, and they come back at under-meal; thus he is acquainted with many tidings. Therefore men call him Raven-God, as is said:

Huginn and Muninn hover each day
The wide earth over;
I fear for Huginn lest he fare not back,—
Yet watch I more for Muninn.  

Huginn means “thought” and Muninn means “memory.”
I fear for thought lest it not come to me.
Covid panics making thinking tough to do; sometimes they make it seems like a frill or frivolous. It isn’t. It is difficult to remain alert in the clustering gatherings that classrooms can be, difficult to remember to seek out the threads enthralling us, that cluster around each and every topic in each and every curriculum guide. Panics can make such seeking seem superfluous, make us long for clean and clear efficiencies. It is not superfluous and the erasures that come from efficiency, that come from panic and exhaustion, despoil the rich and living topics entrusted to teachers and students in schools. This is why I always encourage teachers, to find a spot to calm oneself, to look, to read, to study, to think and remember and gather the threads, and, if they are able and inclined, to write, to publish ones writing, thereby to give support and comfort to their fellow travellers.

I watch out for memory traces in that Raven’s arrival. I know there will be doors, ajar, if I can sit, still.
And then a poem fragment sent out in a September 9, 2020 tweet by Brick Books (his publisher) in honour of the passing of Don Domanski, another teacher of mine I never met, yet met:

I try to follow Meister Eckhart’s advice Do exactly what you would do if you felt most secure sometimes it takes sometimes it doesn’t meanwhile saints graze on the begonias meanwhile ravens go to the edges of the earth and return with our hearts in their beaks.

The ones we though were in our bodies The ones we though were redeemed.

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36 See https://www.sacred-texts.com/neu/pre/pre04.htm, 51.
37 See, for example, Jackie Seidel & David W. Jardine, The Ecological Heart of Teaching: Radical Tales of Refuge and Renewal for Classrooms and Communities (New York, NY: Peter Lang Publishers, 2016), which contains writings of classroom teachers pondering and practicing this sort of work.
38 Wendell Berry & Bill Moyers, “Wendell Berry on his Hopes for Humanity.”
Don Domanski, “In the Dream of Yellow Birches”

Jackie Seidel and I used Domanski’s book as one of our required texts in a recent graduate class.

One student, understandably, asked if we needed to ask for special permission to do so.

A Lilac Iris

At the center of a stone or at the axis of a tree there’s the silence of a world turning.

The center is everywhere.

Of all things, COVID-19 has most disastrously aggravated our feeling of time running out, of all this having taken too long, of stretched and snapped patience. Many have suffered in this lingering, no doubt about it.

But again, there is a hint. Many teachers have expressed to me in this meanwhile their desire to rethink the old familiaris of school. Re-think what might be found in the eyes in mirrors, or the ones of Ravens:

I’ve never noticed this before, a lilac iris, probably coloured out of reflects of the surroundings. A quick look on Google Images shows that this reflect is not frequent. Now what?

There is no “everyday,” no “normal” day. We all pretend there is. We all add to the myth. It’s an act of pretense which helps us survive, to feel there’s ground under our feet, when we know full well that beneath that ground there is an eternity of stars and galaxies, a great unknown which, on one of these normal days will swallow us whole.

We don’t need to be afraid, even though this might feel like a sort of misty dissolving or the like. It isn’t. It is “too much to take,” but it need not be swallowed whole. Just take that as your starting point and let it be the center of your ventures. That will help you settle down from this sometimes too-large invocation of living relations.

A lilac iris probably reflecting its surroundings.

The fires in the West are teachers. The smoke that stings teaches as it stings. The First Nations children buried in unmarked graves would like a word with you. The drought across the prairies has a lesson all planned, as do the European floods, as does COVID-19, as does January 6, 2021. And, of course –get used to this– between submitting this paper and editing the final copy, California fires, East coast US floods, and we had 18 days of 33 degrees Celsius straight with no rain this summer.

Teachers every single one.

I’ve often advised student-teachers that when they move from the hard work of having elaborated a living field with their students, on to the next topic, they will, of necessity or at least frequently, run smack into a solid wall all over again.

Starting all over again. What shall we say about those unmarked graves, knowing full well that simply not mentioning them says something loud and clear that is hard to read.

You can become practiced at this over time, but our everyday lives mitigate against such openness and necessitate setting off, deep

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39 Don Domanski, All Our Wonder Unavenged (London, ON: Brick Books, 2010), 121.
40 Don Domanski, “The Wisdom of Falling,” in Where the Words Come From: Canadian Poets in Conversation, ed. T.
breath, all over again, into the work of remembering and thinking, Odin’s lovely, horrible pair of familiars. Holding back. Keeping clear.

Even the well-being of my inhaling is rained down from the trees overhead. And this said as the smoke from fires to the West choke a bit. “I can’t breathe” comes round all over again as a consequence, all over again, of what we have trouble facing, behind our backs and right before our eyes, all over again.

And to sit here, writing, and you, reading, all over again, textus, weaving. “Threads interweaving, criss-crossing”

Certainly one can call this process a "while" [Weilen], but this is something that nobody measures and that one does not find to be either boring or merely entertaining. The name I have for the way in which this event happens is "reading." With reading one does not imagine . . . that one can already do it. In reality, one must learn how . . . Now the word Lesen\(^4\) carries within it a helpful multiplicity of harmonic words, such as gathering together [Zusammenlesen], picking up [Aufelesen], picking out [Auslesen], or to sort out [verlesen]. All of these are associated with "harvest" (Lese), that is to say, the harvest of grapes, which persist in the harvest. The word Lesen also refers to something that begins with spelling out words, if one learns to write and read, and again we find numerous echo words. One can start to read a book [anlesen] or finish up reading it [auslesen], one can read further in it [weiterlesen], or commonplace in Anglican church services, of saying "today’s lesson is taken from Matthew," meaning both literally "a reading from Matthew" but also reading that reading for its "lesson."


\(^{44}\) Lesen translates as "read," a German kin to the English word "lesson"—I think, for example, of an old
just check into it [nachlesen], or one can read it aloud [vorgespen]. All of these point towards the harvest that is gathered in and from which one takes nourishment.\footnote{Hans-Georg Gadamer, “The Artwork in Word and Image: So True, So Full of Being,” The Gadamer Reader: A Bouquet of Later Writings, trans. and ed. R. Palmer (Evaston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2007), 217-8.}

Lesson plans: harvesting, sorting out, gathering together. Wonderful things to re-consider in the face of the grain of things.

**An Old, Familiar Face Takes Nourishment**

So, then, whence the lilac in this Raven’s pupil?

It is unclear. But as per one of my lingering habits, I zoomed in on that lilac eye photo, just to see what I can see, like the bear who came over the mountain. And, well, whaddya know?!

See? White shirt with sky-blue stripes. Pale skin halo pinkish, sparse-long white-grey hair, elbows akimbo with camera held up, blue/white striped shirt below, pixilated. That’s me in the spotlight, losing my religion (as the saying goes), right in the midst of a lilac arcing eye eyeing that very spotting.

Be still. Click.
Further Reading


Deaf Culture, Associational Inclusion, and Ending Waste in Education

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During the COVID-19 pandemic, it became clear that forms of access to schools were insufficient to meet the challenge of an airborne pathogen.

The many forms of accommodation needed as a result of this pandemic have reinvigorated interest in what it might mean to consider forms of Universal Design and equity in learning situations. Such conversations, whether in the media, informal discussion, or academic publications, act as reminders that schools have yet to fully ensure that students of all capacities, languages, and other forms of difference have equitable access to information, communication, and opportunities for flourishing through learning.

Such conversations, too, act as reminders that, while schools may gesture towards welcoming pluralism, they nonetheless lag on robust inclusion of all differences. This paper focuses on how schools exclude a particular group within Deaf communities that shares a set of similar beliefs, values, and practices, which is known as Deaf culture, and shares a common signed language—American Sign Language (ASL). ASL is a complete, natural language and has its own grammatical system, independent of English.

Dewey provides some conceptual tools that can help explore the importance of Deaf education in relationship to the development of ASL, Deaf Culture, and pluralist democratic culture in general. Much of the excellent work done by contemporary philosophers of education eager to extend Dewey’s work to disability studies has thus far centered on intellectual inclusivity and inclusion on the basis of individual intellectual diversities. This work has helped push educators to understand the breadth of diversities in pluralistic democracy and shifted the ways we think and educate around intellectual diversities and disabilities, focusing on how school practices and variations in forms of education-related flourishing should also be considered from the perspective of robust (if individual) differences.

While we build on this important work, we begin to push more toward thinking about associations within and between cultures as another task of anti-ableist Deweyan innovation. Deaf culture and ASL pose a different challenge to inclusivity, as they both advocate for a critical examination and mitigation of exclusions from public schools—and challenge pluralistic democracy to recognize and respect minoritized languages and cultures within pluralism.

At the heart of our argument is an engagement with Dewey’s cautions against how waste is structured into educational institutions. While his focus is on the kind of waste the separating structures and functions of educational institutions create, we focus on the different ways oppressive exclusions work to create conditions of Dewey’s Contribution to an Educational Philosophy of Intellectual Disability,” *Educational Theory* 58, no.1 (2008), 45-62.


educational waste for Deaf students and, further, waste opportunities to educate about Deaf culture and language.

Critiquing Waste

The current practices of inclusion for Deaf students are more wasteful than useful.

Deaf students have come to school with a whole mind and a whole body but leave school with a half mind and a less healthy body. While there have been legal moves to guard against this waste, many educational institutions have yet to fully understand how limited approaches to “inclusion” render inequitable access and hinder the cultivation of Deaf culture and ASL. Inclusion of disabled students in public schools increased when the federal law, Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), was enacted in 1990. IDEA requires schools to ensure that disabled students are educated in the least restrictive environment (LRE). In the context of Deaf students, most Deaf students are placed in public schools where spoken English is the only medium of instruction and the majority of students and teachers are abled, nondeaf, and not proficient in a signed language.

In order to make the most restrictive environment less restrictive, most public schools have provided access and support services, such as interpreting, tutoring, and notetaking services. Some have provided direct instruction in sign language. Despite those provisions of services, Deaf students reported numerous issues with public schools. Deaf students had experienced no or limited access to sign language, the absence of Deaf role models or peers, unqualified interpreters, and isolation. No or limited access to sign language means Deaf students are unable to acquire, build, and use their native language. Not having a peer or teacher who shares a similar biocultural status affects Deaf students’ sense of belonging, language and identity development, and understanding of their world. The presence of sign language interpreters in the classroom does not automatically render equality because there are reported problems with interpreters’ language skills, professionalism, and intercultural competence. Deaf students experience isolation as a result of not having the opportunity to learn and build their native language, to interact with peers and teachers with similar backgrounds, and to participate fully and equally via an interpreting service. Deaf students’ lived experiences show that public schools’ practices work against true inclusion by ignoring the

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7 Pirone, “Equity Literacy.”
8 Pirone, Henner, and Hall, “American Sign Language Interpreting.”
key forms of communication necessary to build and sustain democratic pluralist culture.

Public schools need to examine their own ideologies, policies, and practices that are rooted in audism, linguicism, and phonocentrism, each of which create inequity. Audism is a form of bias that maintains the superiority of hearing ability, linguicism insists on the superiority of language, and phonocentrism on the superiority of speech. Deaf students have experienced these forms of oppression in most public schools whose policies and practices barely recognize and make sign language a part of the medium of their instruction and communication (linguicism), seldomly embrace or celebrate being Deaf/Deaf culture (audism), and hardly include visual-kinetic modality (phonocentrism). Also, the majority of educational professionals in charge of making decisions on placements and services as well as evaluating the quality of services, are abled, hearing, and English speakers, and that gives rise to linguicism and audism.

To mitigate this, educational professionals and administrators might take a training on equity literacy in the hopes that it will provide them with the knowledge and skills “to become a threat to the existence of inequity in their spheres of influence.”

Addressing Waste

This Deweyan inspired critique of waste adds to already existing work on Dewey and disability, and connects as well to Dewey’s discussion of the key aspect of communication in education.

Where others have reasonably focused on how ableist culture needs to include intellectual diversities, we develop a Deweyan approach to how to make Deaf Culture/ASL a part of an inclusive civil education in schools and spaces where audist and linguist ideologies, practices, and policies waste opportunities.

The first step for educators to reduce the waste is to change their center of knowledge when they interact with Deaf students. In public schools, where 88 percent of all Deaf learners attend, the majority of nondeaf educators and peers have a different center of knowledge and experiences through aural/oral orientation. They have little or no concept of Deaf ways and that has an impact on Deaf students and their educative experiences. Educators need to recognize, embrace, and utilize common practices and knowledges of Deaf students. In other words, educators need to recognize how Deaf epistemology is used by Deaf people.

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11 Bauman, “Audism.”


13 Paul Gorski, "Rethinking the Role of “Culture” in Educational Equity: From Cultural Competence to Equity Literacy," Multicultural perspectives 18, no. 4 (2016), 221-226.


Deaf people have “a different center of knowledge and experiences than non-deaf people” because they acquire knowledge and experience using their visual modality as they navigate through the world that relies primarily on audition. Deaf epistemology is important in that it offers “an opportunity for people to understand Deaf ways of being in the world, of conceiving that world and their own place within it, both in actuality and in potentiality.”

De Clerck adds that there are multiple epistemologies within Deaf communities because Deaf people’s knowledge and experiences are not homogenous; they have diverse identities, such as Black Deaf and DeafBlind, all of which shape their knowledge and experiences. For associative learning to occur, educators de-center their aural/oral-based knowledge and incorporate/apply practices that promote Deaf ways of learning, interacting, and communicating.

For instance, during the pandemic, many Deaf students have struggled to engage in remote learning because most educators’ center of knowledge did not alert them that their remote teaching methods and choices of online platform (i.e., Microsoft Teams) would render inequity due to their heavy reliance on sound. To de-center their knowledge, they might reach out to Deaf experts for consultation and observe/learn how Deaf teachers conduct remote learning (and in-person learning as well).

An observation like this will provide educators with valuable information, such as the use of nonverbal cues and eye gaze and how they promote relationality and associational learning. Smith and Ramsey found that knowing how to use nonverbal cues to direct Deaf students’ attention is key to their learning and this practice is often used by Deaf parents to Deaf children. In her phenomenological account of, among other things, leaving her hearing aids home, Teresa Blankmeyer Burke explores the “reciprocal-ity” of “intimacy of the gaze” underscoring the associational function of a language structured and lived in ways that hearing and spoken language are not. She suggests that while all children bond with their mothers, when hearing children begin to use language the “intensity” of the gaze shifts. While she is clear that this is speculative and also that children who bond in ways other than through sight are not taken into this speculative account, her point is to raise questions about how an intense visual language brings particular qualities to relationality. Those examples represent the quotidian ways in which Deaf epistemology shapes experience and relationality. Such epistemologies ought not be wasted by educators’ limited understanding.

The second step for educators to diminish the waste further is to dismantle their audist ideology that being Deaf is abnormal. The idea of normalcy emerged back in the nineteenth century when a group of scientists created a statistical measurement tool to identify an individual’s ability, achievement, behavior, and intelligence compared to the average. This tool produced

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17 Paddy Ladd, Understanding Deaf Culture: In Search of Deafhood (Clevedon, UK: Multilingual Matters, 2003), 19.


22 S. A. Annamma, A.L. Boelé, B.A. Moore, & J. Klingner, “Challenging the Ideology of Normal in
profound effects such that the public saw (and still see) people with disabilities, including being Deaf, as a deviance from the norm. In the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries, educators working with Deaf students shared a similar perspective: “To be human was to speak. To sign was a step downward in the scale of being”.

This perspective still pervades today’s education, but perhaps in a more subtle manner. Despite some subtle changes in bias, though, educators need to discontinue perceiving Deaf people as deficient and instead understand deafness as an aspect of biocultural diversity. Biocultural diversity is a “system of interrelated and interdependent diversities: biological, cultural, and linguistic.” Being Deaf, sign language, and Deaf culture fit this construct. Deaf people are bioculturally diverse in that they have unique knowledge, worldviews, and cultural practices that are rooted in being Deaf and sign language—especially when they live in a world that relies on oral/aural ways of living. Learning about distinctive ways of living through a visual-kinetic lens will not only improve the quality of life, but also enhance one’s understanding of what it means to be human.

Once professionals recognize the biocultural status, they will take a step forward and start to recognize and learn how ASL and Deaf culture bring Deaf people together. Viewed through a Deweyan lens, Deaf Culture and ASL focus on associational ties among members of its own culture and language—thereby following Dewey’s stress on education’s role in developing and sustaining ties among people through learning. By understanding Deaf Culture and ASL, a bridge is created that formulates conjoint experience in a way that both reflects the experiences of the persons communicating and provides an invitation to associate through ASL. Consider again this Deweyan idea, now viewed through the example of communicating with a Deaf student or colleague: “To formulate requires getting outside of it, seeing it as another would see it, considering what points of contact it has with the life of another so that it may be got into such form that he can appreciate its meaning.”

Language development, reflection, and relationality, then, are key to understanding how educative associations are created and experienced. As Dewey puts it, social groups are preserved through transmission which “occurs by means of communication of habits of doing, thinking, and feeling from the older to the younger.” We need to caution that hiring an ASL interpreter does not serve as a substitute for teachers who are able to build and facilitate associational ties. An ASL interpreter’s main task is to facilitate communication between hearing teachers and Deaf pupils. If a teacher’s approach is audist, linguist, and/or phonocentric, then there’s nothing the interpreter can do about it, because it is not the interpreter’s job to redress the teacher’s oppressive action. Also, it’s not the interpreter’s job to teach or create an environment that makes educative associations possible for Deaf pupils. This kind of task is actually for teachers, and they need formulated experience to understand what modifications they need to make in order to

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23 Bauman and Murray, Deaf Gain.
29 Dewey, Democracy and Education, 5.
minimize any possible triggers of audism, linguicism, and phonocentrism.

By building on the connection among ASL/Deaf Culture, disability studies, and Deweyan philosophy, we stress the key role of language and culture in building educative associations and encouraging schools to understand the importance of Deaf Gain. We explore Dewey’s contention that the best form of education works against the waste of isolation caused by institutional divisions and communicative limitations. We are particularly interested in how spaces and practices in schools create disabling conditions that a Deweyan approach can help justify.

Inclusion of ASL and Deaf Culture into Deweyan theorizing about disability can mitigate the individualized sense of waste others have discussed and also extend to mitigating the more social and political loss entailed by audist, linguicist, and phonocentric exclusions. In other words, by situating inclusion as inclusion of communication, culture, and association, we shift the conversation away from individualized inclusion to both a broadening of dominant culture’s inclusivity and the cultivation of ASL and Deaf Culture as well as solidarities among diverse forms of embodiment. Creating both the opportunities for Deaf students to engage in associational learning in Deaf Culture/ASL and in dominant culture and providing non-Deaf students with opportunities to learn about Deaf Culture and learn through ASL can help bolster a more associational sense of Dewey’s potential contributions to equitable and inclusive education.

Dewey opens the way to think about a diverse society needing its members to engage in acts of translation for one another in a reciprocal and respectful way that also recognizes differences will continue to exist—and as we’ll explore in our conclusion, differences simply are.

Translation is not only the act of moving from one language to another but is also a way of situating one’s sense of meaning in conversation with another person of the same language. So, for instance, centering Deaf students’ education within Deaf culture also encourages acts of translation as Deaf students, in their native language, think about what they want to say to one another.

Dewey discusses how communication can connect people living at a distance and this may provide a way to think about communication connecting people across different forms of connection. He pushes consideration of the role of reflection in communication, noting the difference between face-to-face speech, letter-writing, or other technologically-mediated communication within a language (or the change of meanings over time and distance from experience). His emphasis on understanding communication as a site of reflection and translation indicates that not only can communication be accomplished in divergent ways, it suggests as well the need for students to understand multiple modes of communication.

Rote learning of language, Dewey cautions, does not provide students with the ability to enable language use to grow beyond its initial instantiation. Students need to know their native language in order to fully express their experiences to others in that language. In this sense, all language use is the act of translating. We do caution that there are different scales of such translation. Multilingualism, for instance, poses potentially different translational challenges than communication within a culture even though both acts of communication are accomplished with more effectiveness if speakers consider their audiences as they communicate.

However, nondeaf people, who learn ASL, do not know nor understand the lived experience of being Deaf, and so there are limitations

30 Dewey, Democracy and Education, 86.

31 Dewey, Democracy and Education, 41.
to what translates across lived experiences can accomplish. Still, ensuring schools address linguistic diversity may nonetheless provide ways to establish respectful associate ties that understand that languages are sites of lived difference. The potential that this transmission is imperfect may help signal, too, that we expect to be associating across differences that we cannot bridge completely.

Dewey suggests this is something like a fusion of horizons: even if both parties do not fully change the deep context of their own individual experiences, they find some shift in the need to communicate across difference. This shift in understanding happens whether one is communicating with someone in one’s culture or someone in another:

To be a recipient of a communication is to have an enlarged and changed experience. One shares in what another has thought and felt and in so far, meagerly or amply, has his own attitude modified. Nor is the one who communicates left unaffected. Try the experiment of communicating, with fullness and accuracy, some experience to another, especially if it be somewhat complicated, and you will find your own attitude toward your experience changing; otherwise you resort to expletives and ejaculations. The experience has to be formulated in order to be communicated. To formulate requires getting outside of it, seeing it as another would see it, considering what points of contact it has with the life of another so that it may be got into such form that he can appreciate its meaning.32

In short, insufficient attention to the communicative core of democracy creates the wasteful conditions that invite ableism, audism, and linguicism and eventually create exclusionary educational institutions. Preventing this waste requires looking at how assumptions about normative language use pervade schools.

So, one way to prevent this waste is to teach about and through linguistic diversity, encouraging schools to address Deaf students in their native language to continue the existence of Deaf culture as part of pluralist democracy. Dewey notes this necessary connection between communication and society, “Society not only continues to exist by transmission, by communication, but it may fairly be said to exist in transmission, in communication.”33 Thinking about disability in relationship to culture and language adds a cultural component to how educators frame associational inclusion, that is, forms of inclusion that bring pre-existing associations and cultures, like Deaf Culture, into school communities.

Deaf Gains

As a mode of conjoined experience, then, ASL/Deaf Culture, especially in the context of an audist-dominant culture and school system, has to: advocate for the centrality of communication, remind audist- and linguist-dominant institutions that they exclude necessary forms of communication, and point out wasted opportunities to add to the flourishing of Deaf Culture/ASL.

Not only can Deaf people formulate experience once they have access to their own culture and language, but they can also capitalize upon their bio-culturally diverse qualities (of being Deaf) to make significant contributions to a larger society. This is known as Deaf Gain.34

Deaf Gain is an ontological/epistemological framework that recognizes being Deaf as a human gain and challenges the notion of normalcy that defines deafness as a hearing loss.35

32 Dewey, Democracy and Education, 6-7.
33 Dewey, Democracy and Education, 6.
34 Bauman & Murray, Deaf Gain.
35 Bauman & Murray, Deaf Gain.
Deaf does not lead one to medical problems, social isolation, or incapability, but, rather, offers unique and valuable ways of being in the world. In addition, the Deaf have certain qualities that are superior to those of their nondeaf counterparts. There are numerous phenomena where Deaf people’s qualities and ways have helped elevate humanity. This is the core of Deaf Gain.

There are three dimensions of Deaf Gain: Benefit, Contribute, and Ahead. Benefit refers to what Deaf people gain from being Deaf. There are studies showing that being Deaf has several superior qualities in several domains such as cognition (visual processing, recognition, and memory), social psychology (human connections with people), and even mindfulness. Contribute refers to what Deaf people offer to help elevate humanity. Sign language is one of these important phenomena—one that has a profound impact on the world. It provides linguists with a better understanding of the meaning of human languages (i.e., speech is no longer the sole form of human language), and it also creates an opportunity for nondeaf parents to communicate with their nondeaf babies at a much earlier age. Ahead refers to such occurrences where being Deaf itself helps innovate the ways of living. Technologies (i.e., TV and Internet), architecture, literary expression, and the use of gesture are examples of Ahead. These examples signify the gainfulness of being Deaf and ways of being in the world. This concept fits well with Dewey’s understanding of the importance of associational ties in education and the key role that language plays in helping to name experience and reflect on it with others.

Stressing the need for associational inclusion of ASL/Deaf culture means recognizing both that educational institutions must take responsibility for supporting the flourishing of students in ASL/Deaf culture (and thus ASL/Deaf culture itself)—and recognizing and encouraging, without any interference, students’ experiences of Deaf Gain. In other words, schools need to not waste opportunities for Deaf students to understand who they are, what they are capable of, and how they can become a contributing citizen in their own right.

Further, shifting away from the wasteful practices in relationship to ASL/Deaf culture highlights what students bring to associative and educative processes. This kind of critical democratic pluralism recognizes being Deaf/Deaf Ways in terms of Deaf Gain—seeing both the biocultural factual capacities of Deaf people and seeing, too, that rethinking how people are valued in relationship to exclusionary norms is simply wasteful. Such critical associative communication opens possibilities for recognizing and valuing other forms of Deaf Gain embedded in intersectional differences within Deaf cultures.

For example, exploring and understanding differences in signed languages, including Black ASL or queer ASL, expand not only the analysis of communicative possibilities, but they also trace exclusions within communities. This could lead to new forms of Deaf Gain as a result. Mo- ges, for instance, analyzes how the assimilationist shift to oralism away from manualism (sign language) was an attempt to push white Deaf students to pass—but as racist educators were disinterested in what was happening in Black Deaf schools, those schools continued to teach

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36 Bauman & Murray, Deaf Gain, 20.
37 Bauman & Murray, Deaf Gain, 22.
38 Bauman & Murray, Deaf Gain, 25.
39 Bauman & Murray, Deaf Gain, 26-27.
40 R.T. Moges, “From White Deaf People’s Adversity to Black Deaf Gain’: A Proposal for a New Lens of Black

and develop sign language. Black Deaf Gain, contends Moges, was enabled due to the exclusions of white supremacy as white Deaf schools moved towards assimilationist oralist practices. While Black Deaf school suffered from underfunding, in another sense they flourished outside of the constraints of white ableist assimilationism and were able to build distinctive Black ASL. As Moges puts it, “the paradox of disempowerment essentially nourished Black Deaf Gain.”

Sustaining Deaf Gain

In this final section, we call on schools to understand that they do not only need to provide, but also support, the sustainability of Deaf cultures, signed languages, and embodied knowledges for Deaf Gain to occur.

This means that schools need to create and sustain an environment where Deaf students learn and build on their natural languages, cultures, and ways of being in the world. With full and equal access to their languages, cultures, and Deaf epistemologies, they will begin to experience Deaf Gain. So, this suggests that Deaf Gain needs educators to facilitate, in the best Deweyan tradition, the growth of Deaf students in the context of such gain.

When Dewey theorized the need for growth in education, he suggested that students need to have experiences that will encourage them to develop more interactions with educative results. For Deaf students, this means they will need an ASL-centric and Deaf-centric space within public schools for their educative experiences to occur. We see this call as essentially associational in nature: we ask schools to understand that their cultures need to embrace Deaf ways/Deaf epistemologies; we ask that Deaf students are educated in a manner that shows to them the importance of their role in school culture and that helps with the growth and flourishing of Deaf culture; and we hope that with attention to those necessary associations and forms of growth that come from the particular biocultural aspects of being Deaf, schools will understand the need to engage in more robust associations across and through difference.

While our discussion of sustaining Deaf Gain will necessarily focus on Deaf students, part of our call here is to see the necessity for a flourishing Deaf culture to help sustain those students who are already participating in that culture. If schools are intent on creating associational ties among its community members and creating ties to other communities, they need to first recognize that students come to schools already immersed in community-based practices. When schools waste the chance to recognize students’ host community, and when they further waste the chance to embrace that cultural membership for educative purposes, Deaf students and students from other minoritized communities can easily see the school as distant, indifferent, and unempathetic. For those already culturally-identified Deaf students, this lack of recognition is part of long traditions of dismissing their home language as not a real language, and long traditions, too, of assuming Deaf people are not bringing resources to the school.

By making ASL and Deaf culture part of schools, schools need to create an ASL/Deaf-centric space that makes Deaf students, who are not yet part of the culture, feel welcomed to practice traditions to which they have not yet fully connected. Also, schools need to consider their redistribution of material, cultural, and social access and opportunity. The foundation of this concept of redistribution is that every group

42 Moges, “From White Deaf People’s Adversity to Black Deaf Gain.”
43 Moges, “From White People’s Adversity,” 83.
should receive an equal amount of access and opportunity, with no one group getting more than others.

Gorski underscores that schools cannot base their redistributions on what they have—instead, they need to take a close look at what they choose to distribute. In terms of Deaf culture in public schools, schools redistribute their access and opportunity by providing Deaf culture/ASL materials and instruction, hiring Deaf educators as cultural/language models, and creating a space for Deaf students to build on their language skills and socialize with Deaf peers.

It is important to recognize the significant distinction between access to an ASL-centric space and access to an ASL interpreting service. The former allows Deaf students to learn and build on their language skills while the latter is for Deaf students to engage in communication with nondeaf teachers and peers who do not know ASL. A space is considered ASL-centric when students learn ASL directly, communicate fully in ASL, and receive direct instructions on various subject matters in ASL. This is where the richness of associational learning occurs as “language also helps us develop the ability to find, formulate, and connect relationships between concepts, ideas, and things.” Without such spaces, Deaf students experience exclusions and costly wastes.

While there has been some discussion in political theory and philosophy of education about whether some schools ought to prioritize one form of culture over another and whether certain cultures might fade with technological interventions like cochlear implants—as Walter Feinberg has argued—this kind of assessment, maybe even unintentionally, signals the potential for liberal institutions to consider laying cultures to waste. Such arguments rely on an understanding of majority culture not being a constellation of many diverse cultures and associations and they also rely on schools as institutions not gaining from consideration of how participation in and knowledge of such cultures foster growth for everyone.

Though very reasonably concerned with the necessity of a right to exit from cultures that damage particular members, liberal theorists do understand the gains that cultures provide. To be more specific, when Feinberg considers Deaf culture and children, he specifies those born to hearing parents and thus those potentially disconnected from Deaf culture. So rather than arguing that they would benefit from contact with Deaf culture, which is our argument, he considers them not analogous to other forms of generationally-consistent identities. We think the conversation has shifted somewhat by now, although there remain debates over Deaf culture because of the potential for generational-inconsistency—for example, there is a tendency to link disability-related formation with queerness and other subjugated knowledges and communities. But as Lane points out, there are many justifications for seeing Deaf culture as an

45 P. Gorski, “Avoiding Racial Equity Detours.”
46 Eckert & Rowley, “Audism.”
ethnicity—even if some of its members are not able to fully participate in traditions and languages until they reach schools. The crux of the matter is whether Deaf students have access to schools in which they can do so.

Solidarity of common experience and deeper understanding of long traditions of creativity in the face of exclusion can provide a way to build associational ties, both for those who have experienced exclusion and those with whom they tangentially share exclusions. In other words, the traditions of Deaf culture provide one model for thinking about biocultural membership and for making connections of solidarity with other students also navigating disabling institutions.

As Tara Yosso has pointed out in the context of race, communities bring wealth to schools and it is in the best interests of all to understand how those diverse forms of community wealth sustain students. By providing Deaf students with a deeper understanding of their gains, moreover, they are encouraged to build their culture further and to recognize how the intersections of race and other diversities have also shaped that culture.

Like Dewey’s point about communication creating a situation in which one reflects upon what one is saying and considers, too, one’s audience, this relationship between communication and cultural flourishing provides other kinds of gains. By communicating within one’s culture, one understands more deeply what that membership means, with all the kinds of gains the culture helps transmit. Deaf Gain offers a sustainable strategy away from waste because it reassures students, even if they face disabling conditions and inequities in schools, that their Deaf forms of attentiveness to movement, face, and other details provide them with skills that nondeaf people lack—that their culture has developed and continues to develop understandings of connection, creativity, and continuity.

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52 Lane, “Ethnicity.”
54 Moges, “From White People’s Adversity.”
Relinquishing the Fight for Public Education

Alison Van Rosendaal
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For as long as I can remember, I have loved the idea of public education.¹

As a teacher and school leader for more than 25 years, I’ve committed my life’s work to creating democratic spaces for wonder, exploration, community building, and problem-solving. Striving for education that serves the common good, I have returned, time and again, to the enduring questions of curriculum theory. What is education for? What do we believe about the nature of human understanding? What forms of knowledge, ways of life, languages, experiences, cultures, and aspirations are sanctioned—and which are marginalized? What norms, power structures, and privileges are perpetuated? To whom are we accountable, and for what? In what ways might we organize ourselves for learning, such that the young people entrusted to our care live well in the world today, as well as into an unknowable future?

For the better part of my career, I held fast to the belief that we’d eventually figure things out—that all of these prickly questions around what it means to educate and to be educated would be answered with interesting, ethical, and humane ways of being with one another. What was required, I thought, was the collective passion and commitment of people who were willing to fight for public education.

Recently, though, I’ve found myself getting old. The issues and ideals I found myself so ready to fight for in the early days of my career are becoming persistent nuisances. I don’t think it’s that I love education any less. Perhaps it’s—disappointment.

I wanted it to be better than this. I wanted, at the very least, to do no harm. With so much yet to be done in education, and having taken my own sort of responsibility for it for these past 25 years, I’m not content to settle for the solutions that I’ve encountered or created to date. It’s hard to see how the fight I thought I was fighting has really mattered at all.

Public education is remarkably resistant to change. In spite of repeated attempts at reform and revolution, modern schooling remains orientated towards a singular and impossibly narrow view of teaching and learning. Systematic attempts to modify, improve, or reimagine the project of schooling have taken place since its inception—with little to no effect.²

As with other social phenomena of the modern era, education is shaped by a neoliberal logic of hyper-individualism and economic determinism—a shallow meritocracy that reduces learning to its simplest commodifiable form.³ In schools, a barrage of distractions keeps us mired in the day-to-day, susceptible to an “amnesia-like forgetting” and a “sleepy taken-for-grantedness” that mistakes the current state of public education for the natural order of things.⁴ Like wood that is petrified through generations of stasis and sedimentation, we can’t seem to find our way free from a self-perpetuating rhetoric where the

¹ In this article, the term public education is used to refer to any K-12 education system in Canada.
³ David Smith, Teaching as the Practice of Wisdom (New York, NY: Bloomsbury, 2014).
⁴ David Jardine, “To Know the World, we Have to Love it”: Playground Secrets from a Teacher and a Student (unpublished manuscript, 2020).
ends justify the means, and the means, in turn, justify the ends.\(^5\)

**Disruption and Possibility**

In March 2020, however, in response to the looming COVID-19 pandemic, schools around the world closed their doors. Almost overnight, schooling was reconfigured into a range of remote learning models. *Now,* I thought—if ever there was a time to pull back the curtain and critically examine both the aims and the means of public education, the time would be *now.* When the activities and exercises that constitute an instructional program were being beamed directly into the homes of our students and their families, how could they *not* be subjected to scrutiny? When assessment practices, and their necessity, were finally open to negotiation? When so many of the secondary functions of schools as social safety nets were suddenly thrust front and center? When inequity and injustices were more visible than they had ever been?

I waited, with bated breath, for revolution. From my vantage point, pandemic-related disruptions represented a singular and spectacular opportunity to re-imagine the whole project of schooling. Perhaps, I thought, we were entering Arundhati Roy’s portal—a liminal space where transformative change might finally occur:

> Historically, pandemics have forced humans to break with the past and imagine their world anew. This one is no different. It is a portal, a gateway between one world and the next. We can choose to walk through it, dragging the carcasses of our prejudice and hatred, our avarice, our data banks and dead ideas, our dead rivers and smoky skies behind us. Or we can walk through lightly, with little luggage, ready to imagine another world. And ready to fight for it.\(^6\)

Wrapping up my first year of PhD studies, I abandoned my original topic (which would have required field work in schools with teachers and students) and turned my attention to the question of how pandemic-related disruptions might prompt change within the stable and self-reinforcing structures of public education.

Originally, my interest in this topic had to do with *what*—what new pedagogical, structural or organizational patterns might emerge in the wake of this disruption? What innovations, improvisations, or reconceptualizations might come into being? What approaches to teaching and learning might become possible that were previously considered impossible? Over time, however, my focus shifted to questions of *how.* How are well-established feedback loops interrupted? How do new structures and relationships emerge? How might new images of public education enter our collective imagination?

Ultimately, my curiosity came to rest on the question of what it might mean to participate in “an enlarging of the space of the possible around what it means to educate and be educated.”\(^7\) Osberg suggests it requires that we “experience and experiment with the possibility of the impossible.”\(^8\) What would it be like, I wondered, to

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6 Arundhati Roy, “The Pandemic is a Portal,” *The Financial Times,* April 2, 2020, para 49, [https://www.ft.com/content/10d8f5e8-74eb-11ea-95fe-fcd274e9201ca](https://www.ft.com/content/10d8f5e8-74eb-11ea-95fe-fcd274e9201ca).


experience and experiment with the possibility of the impossible? How do we recognize, create, or imagine the spaces where such experiences and experiments might occur? Could pandemic-related disruptions serve as a catalyst between current ways of thinking and novel adaptive forms?

Disappointment

If you too were enthralled with the possibility that the COVID-19 pandemic might occasion transformative change in education, and if you too have watched with anticipation to see how events might unfold, then you won’t be surprised to learn what I have learned—nothing of educational significance has really changed.

Ok. That’s not entirely true. It’s not that nothing changed, but there was no systematic questioning of our educational means or ends, no drawing back of the curtain to reveal the inner workings of the machine, and no collective pause to consider things as though they might be otherwise. A year and a half into this pandemic, it seems clear that Roy’s image of the portal was nothing more than a mirage. In the wake of the biggest upheaval in the history of contemporary public education, schooling remains essentially unchanged.

This is not to say that the pandemic was benign. Routines were disrupted, additional duties were heaped onto the backs of teachers and administrators, and there was a dramatic surge in mental health concerns. The cancellation of field trips and clubs, athletics and arts were experienced both as a curricular loss and a loss of community. Where assemblies, excursions, and celebrations would typically have shaped the cadence of the school year, the COVID school year was characterized by an unsettling monotony, interrupted by abrupt but temporary shifts to online learning. Through it all, there was a painful and palpable sense of loss as communities isolated themselves from one another, and from the world.

In the political and bureaucratic responses to school closure and reopening, we encountered the familiar pull of well-established educational dichotomies. Peddling nostalgia for the instructional practices of “the good old days,” there were those who pushed for increased standardization and factory model accountabilities. There were also those who continued to practice a return to relationships and place—to context and circumstance, to wonder and whiling, and a sense of great care for the curricular topics we are entrusted to teach.

But there were no marches in the streets. No rallying cries for change. No toppling of dynasties. In my first year of data collection, a common thread amongst all school-based participants was the distinct sense of suspended animation—just waiting . . . patiently . . . for all of this to end.

Letting Go

As the pandemic drags on and hope for transformative change fades away, I’m left asking myself, what if things don’t ever change?

If not through reform or revolution, and not through an adaptive response to extraordinary disruption, is transformative change in public education actually possible? What if, in spite of everything, nothing ever changes? Could I relinquish hope for a better educational future? What kind of love and commitment would be appropriate to this kind of letting go?

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9 See, for example, “Taking Steps to Improve Student Learning,” YourAlberta, August 6, 2020, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bsF3G248U0g.

10 See, for example, Jardine, “Playground Secrets.”
Sitting in the garden with curriculum scholar David Jardine in the early days of my research, I ask what we should do—how should we seize the opportunity that has presented itself? How might we rally together, with torches and pitchforks in hand, to fight the good fight? How ought we go about changing public education once and for all?

David lets out a laugh. He gestures vaguely to the forest around us, half shrug, half invitation. *We already know what to do.* We know how to do good things in small ways; how to conduct ourselves amongst the students we are entrusted to teach. He talks about chopping wood for the winter, and planting peas in the spring. He recounts stories of the Shakers and their carefully handcrafted furniture—how there is no need to hurry when the end of the world is near. He tells me there are limits to the kind of fighting I imagine—that if you only go out into the woods with dogs, you can’t claim there are no deer.

I’m torn between elation and despair. This is not the answer I was looking for. Also, it is. The notion of letting go of the fight for public education (or letting go of the fight as I have imagined it these past 25 years) feels like abandonment. Laying down my torch and pitchfork feels like both a personal and professional betrayal—an act of collusion in striking the possibility of a different educational future from the hands of the next generation.

I ask him how he reconciles his lifelong commitment to public education with its current state—how he removes himself from the fight. I wonder, he asks, *what makes you think that planting the peas isn’t fighting that fight?*

David talks to the birds who land in the branches overhead, and to the stone Buddha as we walk back along the forest path. He cuts an armload of basil and pulls a fat rutabaga from the garden for me to bring home. He tells me my question is answerable in any number of ways. *The world will give to you what you ask of it.*

**Falling in Love Anew**

To be honest, I don’t know if I have what it takes to plant peas while the world burns.

I recognize, however, that what is required of me is to take up a different kind of fight—to enact a different form of responsibility to this generation, and the next.

Loving a dying world, according to Wendell Berry, requires that we don’t indulge despair—*that we refuse to succumb to loneliness and worldlessness, that we resist cynicism and indifference, that we reject both convenient fictions and radical hope.*

This kind of letting go isn’t about laying my hands in my lap, and waiting for miracles; nor is it about resigning myself to the status quo.

David suggests considering the “small ways in which we might act, think, be careful and encouraging in these ecologically sorrowful times…and how we, how I, might prevent huge world events from visiting themselves upon those small ways and asking them to live up to that hugeness.”

We can’t simply immerse ourselves in the cacophony of crisis, and reject any quiet act of grace that fails to resolve the noise.

He reminds me that our work is—and has always been—about taking care. It is about taking responsibility for that which lies within the boundaries of our own sphere of influence, and accepting that one’s own boundedness, one’s

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limitedness “is its own form of suffering that can then bear itself out in witness of small things done fully, done as well as possible.”

Perhaps fighting the good fight requires falling in love again with the experience of public education, while practicing loving relinquishment of the idea of public education. The pedagogical present, after all, is a space of infinite possibility.

This form of fighting for public education is a matter of remembering how to do the little things by the right standards—how to be present with this student, at this time, in this place; how to treat the topics we are entrusted to teach with care.

The nature of our work in education, Jardine suggests, need not be revolutionary to be transformative—rather, it is a practice of continually “recover[ing] the sensation of life over and against the neurasthenia of the day to day distraction, absorption, and exhaustion of living itself.” Perhaps, in a fractal-like unfolding of the particular into the infinite, how we orient ourselves, how we pay attention, and how we care for what arrives, is precisely the means by which we enlarge the space of the possible around what it means to educate, and to be educated.

The Pedagogical Stance of Possibility

Hermeneutic curriculum scholars often make reference to notions of presence, attunement, or contemplation—a pedagogy of openness, attention, presence, watchfulness, or wonder that allows for unexpected arrivals, interruptions, or disclosures.

Chambers, for example, describes an “education of attention” that is undertaken in apprenticeship and place-based learning that involves “a direct and sensuous engagement with the world” through sustained perceptual and intellectual engagement. Davis and Sumara speak to an “attentive and tentative rhetoric of listening, participating, and engaging” that embraces contingency and ambiguity; avoiding foreclosure on determinate ends. Jardine describes an “intensity of attention and engagement” that requires immediacy, patience, repetition, persistence, and intimacy—that draws upon our full devotion.

Greene used the term wide-awakeness—drawing from phenomenologist Alfred Schutz’s definition of “a plane of consciousness of highest tension originating in an attitude of full attention to life and its requirements.” This image of wide-awakeness, for Greene, involves a deeply aesthetic attentiveness, interest, and imagination—looking through many vantage points, and considering multiple perspectives. It calls for a

16 Chambers, “Where are We,” 119.
17 Chambers, “Where are We,” 120.
continuous reconstruction of experience, and a continuous opening toward the possible.  

Seidel draws attention to the different sense of time that is experienced in this kind of looking—inviting Kairos into institutions ruled by Chronos. “Making spaces for other times to pour into the cracks and fissures. The time of love. The time of contemplation.”  

Seidel’s stance is one of silence, and listening—of “presentness, as intentional focus and meditation.” “With this attitude,” she says, “we make time more spacious, more open.”

Lewis also speaks to a kind of expansive presentness. For Lewis, the stance is one of potentiality—of simultaneously leaning forward and drawing back—a temporary abandonment or suspension of action that allows the present to become saturated with possibility.

Jardine writes:

There is a practice at the heart of hermeneutic work (a practice shared in various and varying ways with ecological awareness and threads of Buddhist philosophy and practice) that results, mostly gradually, but sometimes suddenly and without warning, in the ability to intimately and immediately experience the dependently co-arising (Sanskrit: pratiya-samutpada) reality of things, ideas, word, selves, gestures, actions.

This ability to intimately experience co-arising reality can be conceived of as an enlarging of the space of the possible. Huebner, for example, writes about the web of associations that are present in a moment’s noticing, while Aioki describes the rhizomean connections and multiple meanings to be found in any seemingly ordinary encounter. “In the very being of every separate thing,” observes Jardine, “are nested worlds of relations.” A universe of intricately woven threads where “any seemingly isolated thing on earth in fact is the nestling point of vast, living abundance of relations, generations, ancestries and bloodlines.” In this space of expansive relationality—expansive possibility—“each and every thing [“every word”] becomes the center of all things and, in that sense, becomes an absolute center.”

Although the unfolding of abundant relationships is commonly associated with experiences of “astonishment, amazement, surprise, fascination [and] awe,” such experiences can also be decentering, destabilizing, and unsettling. They can upend what previously seemed certain, and complicate meanings that were otherwise simple, fixed, and dependable. In times of uncertainty, this sense of discomfort and confusion can trigger an urgency to act—to resolve ambiguity, or recover a sense of predictability and control. It is in this grasping for familiar

22 Greene, “Curriculum and Consciousness.”
35 Greene, “Curriculum and Consciousness.”
bannisters that we risk foreclosure on the arrival of the new.\footnote{Arendt, “Human Condition.”}

Moving into this space, once created, requires intentionally subverting seemingly static realities. “Imagination,” Greene offers, “allows people to think of things as if they could be otherwise; it is the capacity that allows a looking through the windows of the actual towards alternative realities.”\footnote{Greene, “Teaching as Possibility,” 4.}

Greene’s view of this imaginative space is not simply an openness to whatever might arrive, but an active transgression of familiar boundaries. It “alters the vision of the way things are; it opens spaces in experience where projects can be devised, the kinds of projects that may bring things closer to what ought to be.”\footnote{Smith, “Wisdom,” 73.}

Enlarging the space of the possible in public education, therefore, might begin with adopting a pedagogical stance of contemplation such that what has previously been taken for granted can be seen as nothing more than a familiar fiction.\footnote{Jardine, “Things Reveal Themselves,” 129.}

Abundance, it seems, arrives in a stance of stillness and openness; affection and devotion; wonder and imagination.

**Just This Time**

In a bit of writing in the spring of 2020, Jardine asked himself where he had been. He answered:

Distracted. Fraught. Exhausted. Heads-up only to bend low again. Often simply wasting away.

At the very beginning of the 2584-page, five-volume commentary on Tsong-Kha-Pa’s *The Great Treatise on the Stages of the Path to Enlightenment* (originally completed in Tibet in 1406), Geshe Lhundub Sopa starts thus: “So, here we are. Right now, you have a life that is precious and valuable.”

So here I am, placed right back in the ripple of this year’s snow melt that I’ve perennially loved for as long as I can remember.

This silly, precious thing betrays me as much as does my old *grevoushede*. My own life reveals itself in passing away, streaming in the sun and down the drive. *Just this* is the time I have to love this.\footnote{Jardine, “Things Reveal Themselves,” 129.}

So, here I am.

*Just this* is the time I have to love this work.

Our moment in history is absolutely unique. Delicately fleeting.

In this time of great upheaval, while bureaucrats and elected officials reach for cheaply-manufactured stakes with which to prop up the house of cards that is our structure for public education, I have *just this time* to practice loving attention within the limits of my pedagogical relationships. I have just this time to shake off the sensation of being distracted—fraught and exhausted—and to learn what is asked of me in this time, and in this place. To re-attune myself to the particular, and the present—without demanding that each action live up to the magnitude of global events. I have *just this time* to adopt the pedagogical stance of possibility.

As I consider how to relinquish the fight for the *idea* of public education, perhaps what is required is practiced attentiveness to the *experience* of public education. In letting go of the fight for the future, I find myself recommitting to showing up in the present. In small ways, within my sphere of influence, I practice devotion to the very center of things.

In doing so, I find myself falling in love all over again.
Learning from a Pandemic

Kate McCabe
Creative Minds Early Childhood Education & Simon Fraser University

Come, curl up in my lap and let us listen to the words of trees and leaves and worms then let us dance butterfly steps together with earth’s breath in celebration and joy Learning, as we twirl, —we are all connected.

I sit at my computer facing west.

It is 6:30 p.m. August 4 and the sun’s angle makes me squint. I pull up the blind to protect my eyes. Rain hasn’t fallen much since June 15. I’m slow to move. I feel foggy-brained; maybe it’s because of the heat and the smoke from the 33 wildfires blazing in BC covering more than 500,000 hectares. While COVID cases are receding, the effects of the last fifteen months linger like the forest-fire smoke above my head. I hold on emotionally and physically to the light breeze that is making its way through the screen door while the leaves of the Japanese maple stir.

As an educator I bring my past with me no matter how hard I try to shake elements of it off. Former ways of being and doing often diminish the now-presencing of teaching and learning. I am unused to seeing the mathematical beauty in the spiral of the snail’s shell or the veins on the oak leaf. The snail’s shell is beauty and math and more, especially when not artificially separated into these categories. I often need children to remind me of this greatness which shows up in their eyes as they look at these beings with me. When I am tired, especially when COVID seems endless and fires rage near me, I begin to see the sun, in its pinkness beyond the haze, as something other than itself. I press upon this life-giving force, my need for tranquility, and fail to see “it is regarding me, it is on my behalf that it beckons attention and devotion and affection, and, well, words.”¹

I practice learning to focus my attention in order to see the alphabet, something preschool children are on the edge of exploring, as a lively place of possibility attached to a world of beings. How do I keep the rich, somatic experience of sense-making that is reading connected to lifetimes of stories full of warnings and celebrations told on cycles of inbreaths and outbreaths? How do I respond respectfully to the landscapes of language as “windows opening on to a more-than-human field of powers”² during these times of isolation and constraint?

John Dewey wrote that education is “a process of living and not a preparation for future living.”³ Yet, I am being asked, directly by families, to make up for lost time as though the pandemic was yet another hurdle to be jumped in order that their child be admitted into one school over another.

Teaching and learning requires loving attention. This is not simply an idea, nor even a feeling, but a tapping into the energetic potential of the heart center of the body, allowing ourselves playful access to ever-larger patterns of energy and space.4

I am called to respond to teaching and learning with my ongoing practice of staying open and welcoming to possible relationships, both seen and unseen. When I understand that the past is not yet finished and the future is not only mine,5 and when I understand that the earth is a complex interconnected web of beings each speaking in their own ways, then I am called to thoughtfully and intentionally walk outside the walls of the classroom with children—rain and shine. How do I learn to be outside with them in ways that don’t separate the classroom from the forest and city streets? How do I come to see all these spaces and places as opportunities that call my imagination into being?6

Opportunities
Are not plain, clean gifts.
they trail dark and chaotic attachments
their unknown backgrounds, luring us further.
One insight leads to another; one invention suggests another variation; more and more

we find ourselves drawn out into a chaos of possibilities.6

As a 60-year-old cancer survivor, the thought of death from COVID seems incongruous with my last few years of living. I want time to engage with the Earth and that is challenging as fires rage at East Gate in Manning Park 63 kilometers from my home and when flash floods have swept through the western states of Rhineland leaving death and destruction. I find myself lost at times in these contexts of fires, floods, and a pandemic. Maybe this sense of disorientation is why Isolation7

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4 This found poem was taken from a reading of Anne C. Klein, “Body as Vehicle,” in Being Bodies: Buddhist Women on the Paradox of Embodiment, ed. by L. Friedman and S. Moon (Boston, MA: Shambhala, 1997), 146.
7 Written permission has been granted by the child’s parents for the purposes of this article.
I long to press an almost weightless armload of layered and crumbled red cedar bark against my dusty shirt. I want time to watch and listen to children as they play their games and build their forts. The Earth seems as though it is being put into question—yet, how do I put myself into question? Or, how do I embrace my vulnerability in the world as a way of understanding myself within it? What are the conditions of my interpretations?

Living and Dying
Entangled
Connected
Infected

I reach out in love.
In rage.

I reach out for help
to know myself in this often taken-for-granted life.

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Isolation was taken long before COVID-19 sent us scrambling for answers about what roles we play in witnessing, questioning, and advocating for enlivened spaces of learning. The little child pictured here was in the throes of a game of mythic proportions. She loves games and stories of life and death, good and bad. Two of her peers sent her to jail to make amends for her bad behaviour. She was only allowed freedom when she had finished reading the stack of books she leans against.

The “punishment” was not because she painted her body with black paint, but seemed handed out for no specific transgression at all—other than she had been bad. Her defeated look, a result of the banishment, was part of the game. This photo asks me to wake up to question what children believe school and books and rules are all about. COVID didn’t bring me to this place, but it has given me the opportunity to think carefully and critically about where I want to go from here in my world of work with preschool children.

Last year, mid-March, before the pandemic captured the city, I was just settling down in my home in a small community in the Cascade Mountains near Manning Park, British Columbia (B.C.) to write my thesis when the novel coronavirus numbers began to rise sufficiently to warrant many Vancouver-based child care centres to close their doors. From the beginning of the pandemic in British Columbia, child care was declared an essential service. Providers were not ordered to close but were also not ordered to stay open. The pandemic exacerbated existing challenges. Early childhood educators received most of the up-to-date information through nightly news rather than directly from government offices. Staffing shortages before the pandemic were a problem—but with the pandemic, staff members stayed at home to care for children who could no longer attend school. So many early childhood educators seemed frayed and exhausted and yet the global pandemic had not reached its peak.

As the founder and director of a stand-alone child care program, I felt buried under Provincial Health Orders and WorkSafe requirements. My everyday, open landscape of toys and tables and fingerpaint was being replaced by measured spaces that limited the number of people in any one area. Posted graphics greeted people now. Children, too, were learning how to read these signs to see how many of them could play together in a space. Learning the legal language of

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8 Gadamer explains that our traditions shape our understanding and this calls me to explore the conditions of my interpretations as broadly as possible. Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, second revised edition (London, UK: Continuum, 2004).
policies and step-by-step procedures became my immediate concern if I was going to keep the child care centre open.

I shared these requirements with parents in writing and by Zoom meetings. Parents were understandably upset. Some shared their anger over lost child care spaces and fought over the definition of essential services. The child care workers felt they were being placed in compromising situations that they couldn’t bear and four of the six employees stopped working at the centre.

I was thankful for daily video conferencing that allowed me to talk to the child care workers, children, and parents as I worked from home as recommended. Mostly I listened. The child care workers shared concerns about their ability to meet the physical distancing recommendations with young children. They worried over how they would wash and sanitize the many things a child touches in a day. They wondered about their own health and safety. Navigating the pandemic seemed daunting and the fear of the unknown was at times overwhelming.

Our child care program stands on the outskirts of Pacific Spirit Park. The area includes forests, beaches, bogs, and creeks in an area of over 2000 acres. Trails abound. The educators looked happy playing hide-and-seek off the marked trails, and building forts. The loss of most of their peers was just one of the many adjustments the children had to make for three months. Forest-based activities invited the children to rest into the guidance and care of the educators rather than being overwhelmed by all that was going on around them.

At the end of March 2020, I walked into the child care centre and what I saw took my breath away. On the floor were 3-by-6-foot rectangles marked out in masking tape. The early childhood educators required the children to use these marked spaces at least part of the day so that personal distancing might be maintained in accordance with health guidelines. Shelves held plastic baskets, each with a child’s name. The baskets held toys, colouring pens, and personal balls of playdough each child brought from home, and that they alone played with, in order to reduce cross-contamination. Tables, too, were divided by lines of masking tape to remind children to keep a physical distance. These lines and baskets were the face of fear. Neither the children or child care workers were wearing masks and their smiles tested my ability to hold multiple perspectives at once.

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It is summer 2021 and I have learned to ride the spasmodic waves of the pandemic. I have quiet conversations with friends and family and take walks on the beach or in the forest listening to whispers of air and light. I gaze at the curvy streaks that the spiral-shelled snail left this morning on the window. My eyes trail the crisscross movement. There are open spaces of sway and little tightly woven clusters of trails. I see possibilities while imagining Snail’s life beneath the canopy of the trees.

Sometimes I feel like Snail—all slow and meandering.

Understanding takes shape along the journey.

Other times, ideas and feelings gush and spray my face and throat often in the same way the garden hose got me this morning—full of surprise, annoyance, and laughter. My hair escapes the clip as I lean into the bushes, reach for the spout, and rethread the hose securely. As I water the plants, parched after weeks of sun, I think about how the pandemic has whipped me up, dried me out, and blew me into hiding.
The children have set up a hospital in the forest. They find a space beside a decaying cedar against which they lean sticks and twigs to create walls and a roof. Leaves and rocks are gathered, and one child is off in the distance digging into the earth with a stick to find a special medicine while an early childhood educator is told to lie down because she is their patient. The children sometimes confer with one another, other times there is a cacophony of directions about what will make the patient healthy. The patient is called upon to “drink this” and “take your medicine.” As I stand and listen I am learning to be a better witness to the play. I am yearning to be awake to the worlding of this place filled with rocks and twigs and leaves that the children seamlessly navigate. I want to learn to attend to the scuttle of the mice and squirrels and feel the vibration the woodpecker leaves behind in the tree above. I want to delight in the mosses and molds beneath my feet.

How do I express what I am coming to know about myself, my teaching, this forest, and this classroom? Donna J. Haraway writes of how the coalitions of peoples and critters facing this [geophysical and geopolitical] storm is critical to the possibilities of earth powers of resurgence.

Kin-making -
How do I begin
to be part of
the earth’s renewal?

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We shape the world not by theories and views but by our very attitude to one another. The world’s hue is made large or small, bright or drab, rich or dull, threatening or secure.

A demand has been placed upon us.
How will I respond?

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9 All photos in this article are taken by my colleague Cata Baeza Hidalgo. She has given me permission to use them in this article.


12 This is a found poem based on Knud E. Logstrup, The Ethical Demand (Philadelphia, PA: Fortress Press, 1971), 19 and the Ojibwe story Mino-bimaadiziwin (the good life).
Notice the child’s abandonment of rubber boots and the muddy pants that suggest a few tries at this position. Imagine this child choosing this just-right branch over other branches. Imagine staying in that position for a long time as this child did—content and feeling the moist sky-soil beneath your head. Here is the open-heartedness of teaching and learning which comes as a gift, having moved toward us without our beckoning. Our role is to be open-eyed and present.13

I begin to feel the weight being lifted through writing, conversation, and critical reflection of my practice. I feel that “[a] wild patience has taken me this far…”14 and I know that I can draw on this energy now as I near what appears to be a slowing of COVID-19 here in British Columbia.

Shops are opening up, face masks are worn less often, and laughter is spilling from restaurants. Two of our early childhood educators are in India. They will be there for the foreseeable future, so we talk together weekly about curriculum; the stories I’ll tell the children and the stories we are becoming more adept at hearing the children tell as we watch their play. We want to regain a sense of our footing in our lives. I’ll start by paying attention to the blackberries and thimbleberries that ripen my experience of the forest beside the child care program. I will take time to attend to children’s laughter vibrating in my throat.

Arms stretch skyward holding brilliantly coloured sun hats - buckets for swirling leaves.

Placing my ear to the ground my awareness of the ever-so-slight turn of the seasons Grows15.

Kate McCabe founded Creative Minds Early Learning Centre in 1982 and more recently, designed a place-based Early Childhood Education Certificate Program for adults who will work with preschool-aged children. She is near the end of writing her doctoral thesis, which is entitled “Walking Backward Out Into the Wild.”

15 Many thanks to Renata Aebi and Dr. Lynn Fels who gave advice on the first draft of this article.
The Storm Was Already Here: Teacher Stress Amid COVID-19

Jonathan M. Coker
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For educators, COVID-19 has been described like a natural disaster bringing an avalanche of stress—but the conditions that made this crisis have been present for decades.

Teachers report some of the highest levels of occupational stress, even in the best of times. This makes the profession unsustainable, leading to demoralization, burnout, and eventual attrition. While the pandemic augmented teacher stress that was already present, it also exposed teachers to new working conditions that lowered their stress. Together, these two strands of thought offer insight into how the status quo of stressful teacher working conditions should be disrupted to make the field more sustainable.

Although interventions abound for reducing teacher stress, they often place the blame on the individual's psychology for failing to adapt to stressful situations, rather than examining the systemic sources of stress like poor working conditions. Individualizing stress perpetuates a problematic narrative wherein teachers are to blame for the harm inflicted upon them. For example, it is well known that teachers are underpaid, work too many hours, and have poor work-life balance due to the demands of the job. Policymakers, researchers, and administrators often respond to this through wellness programs such as mindfulness or self-care models that shift the task of stress reduction back to teachers. Consequently, teachers experience a vicious cycle of doing too much, feeling stressed, and then blaming themselves for feeling stressed. Even though coping is a valuable tool in stress reduction, failing to address longer-term solutions places teachers in a precarious position wherein even minor disruptions can have devastating consequences.

These unaddressed problems in teacher working conditions are analogous to the scenario of a city with poor infrastructure stricken by a natural disaster. Rather than the storm itself,

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2 To understand the impact of stress and attrition, see Meredith L. Wronowski and Angela Urick, “Examining the Relationship of Teacher Perception of Accountability and Assessment Policies on Teacher Turnover during NCLB,” Education Policy Analysis Archives 27, no. 86 (2019): 86, https://doi.org/10.14507/epaa.27.3858.
3 Critiquing stress concepts that fail to link systemic and structural forces to stress, see Dana Becker, Under Stress: The Trouble with Stress as an Idea (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2013).
it is the poor infrastructure that makes the city so vulnerable to devastation. Similarly, the pressures imposed by COVID-19 have highlighted the poor infrastructure present in the landscape of the teaching profession. For example, teachers’ low rate of pay can also equate to poor living conditions. This meant that many teachers were working in their homes during school closures, which were smaller, noisier, and more crowded than their classrooms. I have spoken to teachers who reported groggy spouses who could no longer sleep during the day after graveyard shifts, sweating on porches in the high Florida heat as they worked through daily read-alouds, and storing student data under the beds of roommates. Wi-Fi was often poor and teaching materials were scarce, since many had only one hour or less to remove all needed materials from their classroom before their schools were locked for the rest of the year.

Unfortunately, low rates of pay are not the only working condition leading to precarity. Teachers also typically work too many hours in a regular school week, often blurring the boundaries between work and home. During the pandemic, this too was amplified. I spoke to teachers telling me they were texting and emailing parents until midnight, only to a sleep a few hours before logging in online by 7:00 am to start it all over again. Many of the teachers reported feeling they were on-call like a doctor.

Yet as much as working from home intensified teacher stress, many teachers also experienced improvements to their working conditions while working from home during pandemic-related closures. When working in a school building, lunchtime usually requires teachers to be on-duty monitoring students, the lunch period can be as brief as 15 minutes, and healthy food options are often unavailable. While working from home, teachers reported healthier eating habits such as greater frequency of and more access to nutritious snacks, as well as not having to rush their mealtimes in short lunch blocks at school. Bathroom habits also improved due to the flexibility of teaching virtually. One teacher told me, “I haven’t been able to pee on my own for the past three years. [During COVID-19] it was just a normal thing, not a 6-year-old outside the door guarding it for me.” With no building to commute to, some saved money on gas, and many enjoyed a break from the daily grind of classroom management, particularly if they taught students who were physically violent.

Calls of “getting back to normal” view this pandemic as an anomaly, something to survive, until we can immediately return to the status quo. However, doing so ignores how the status quo has failed us as well as the inevitability of problems to come—whether they be new issues caused by COVID-19, hurricanes, wildfires, blizzards, or even future pandemics. Instead, we can

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use this crisis to shed light on the vulnerabilities that were always lurking in our educational system, as well as to reimagine schools that function differently.

These insights provide a pathway to change both brick-and-mortar and virtual school settings. In terms of brick-and-mortar settings, teachers need restroom relief, as well as longer lunches and lunch monitoring relief. Teachers also need the option of professional development via videoconferencing to save time and transportation costs otherwise spent traveling to various locations. Furthermore, teachers need new classroom management choices, such as temporary virtual school options for students exhibiting violent behaviors, which could provide the needed schedule flexibility for these students to receive more mental health support and ensure greater physical safety.

In terms of virtual school settings, teachers need email cut-off times to help with boundary blurring and to reduce excessive work hours. Districts must also expand digital infrastructure and software resources, since virtual teachers do not have access to physical resources like manipulatives, classroom libraries, science kits, etc. It will also be necessary for schools to provide virtual teachers with a physical space within the school building for the storage of materials and the use of a quiet, uncrowded space to broadcast lessons.

To truly make teaching a more sustainable field, even bolder solutions might be required. Wage increases and affordable housing solutions would be essential, given the poor living conditions of many teachers. Schools could adopt permanent hybrid options, mixing digital and in-person schooling, four-day instructional weeks that provide teachers a fifth day for planning, or even recurring virtual teaching positions to accommodate students and teachers who work

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However, changing the school day is in direct conflict with larger systemic issues such as capitalistic uses of schools as child-storage facilities. After all, school schedules are dictated not by the needs of parents or children, but instead by the needs of employers who demand that schools unburden their employees from childcare to provide more labor to their businesses. Questions of feasibility will likely follow anyone who tries to tackle these ambitious solutions, even though these questions often ignore the cost of maintaining the status quo.

Yet if we do not decide to work towards fixing these vulnerabilities, the next crisis looming in the distance may prove to be an even more painful reminder of what has been left undone.

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Learning to Live Together: The Rise of Learner-Led Private Micro-Schools and the Threat to Public Education

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In 2020, the global COVID-19 pandemic caused disruption to nearly every facet of human society—especially the function of schools. Schooling shifted from a place governed by a bell schedule where students, under the watchful gaze of teachers, worked through common curricula in preparation for standardized testing to an unpredictable, often asynchronous work-from-home scenario that proved difficult to track. At the time of writing this essay, teachers, administrators, policymakers, students, and parents were still trying to figure out what school would look like for the near future. This crisis has caused a renewed conversation within society at large about what and how education should work and prompted the question: “What happens when an education is no longer something that a person goes somewhere to get from someone else?”

This disruption in schooling brought a pressing set of questions to the surface of education discourse for parents and teachers alike. One of the key topics of discussion has been how to motivate students to learn from home. Terms like initiative, motivation, and responsibility have moved to the forefront in discussing pandemic pedagogies. This article will argue that this conversation, though seemingly novel, is in fact in line with a long tradition of dialogues around the why and what of education. There have been many scholars over the centuries who have advocated for a view of education that centers the learner in the education project.

Many terms have been tied to these sorts of education philosophies: learner-led, child-centered, progressive, and alternative. For the purposes of this paper, the phrase self-directed learning (SDL) will be used. The most widely recognized definition of SDL came from adult education theorist Malcolm Knowles:

This process in which individuals take the initiative, with or without the help of others, in diagnosing their learning needs, formulating learning goals, identifying human and material resources for learning, choosing and implementing appropriate learning strategies, and evaluating learning outcomes.

This will be the guiding definition of SDL for the purposes of this article.

There has been an explosion of SDL research in the past few decades. Additionally, there has been a rapid increase in SDL learning environments due to the growth of micro-school franchises like Acton Academy (in a decade Acton has gone from one campus in Austin, Texas to over 200 locations worldwide). This rapid expansion of private school networks has further complicated the debate around school privatization.

2 For example, the Alternative Education Research Organization was founded in 1989, the first issue of the International Journal of Self-Directed Learning was published in 2004, the International Society of Self-Directed Learning was founded in 2005, and the Alliance for Self-Directed Education crystalized into a 501c3 in the past decade.
The connection between the rise of SDL schools and the push for school privatization cannot be ignored. Jerry Kirkpatrick argued in his book, *Montessori, Dewey, and Capitalism: Education Theory for a Free Market in Education*, that the reason for schooling was preparation for a future career. He wrote that to “instill in the young a purpose in life is the fundamental aim of education” and that purpose “in life is defined by one’s chosen values, especially career.”

To Kirkpatrick, one’s purpose (and one’s values) are defined by one’s career choice. School is the place for future workers to gain the necessary skills and knowledge to be productive in their careers.

This, of course, runs contrary to the thinking of educational philosophers like John Dewey, who though critical of schooling practiced in the public education system, saw education as a democratic good. Schools are needed for societies to cultivate a critically conscious citizenry. Dewey is often labeled a reformer not because he was giving up on the notion of public education, but because he was challenging what it had become: an industrialized sorting mechanism, driven by efficiency logic, that molded students into a workforce. Kirkpatrick argued that Dewey was wrong in linking democracy and education together and that instead “the correct connection is capitalism and education.”

What led to this conclusion? Kirkpatrick grounded his argument in the notion of freedom. He wrote the “the distinctive nature of human consciousness . . . [requires] reason and freedom in education. This means nurturing the young, not coercing or neglecting them.” The *how* (or methods) of education derive from the needs of society, Kirkpatrick argued. In ancient Greece, education was aimed at equipping young men with rhetorical and life skills to gain power and esteem. During the medieval period, the reason for education was to equip clergy (again, men) for the church. What then is the purpose of education in contemporary American society? Kirkpatrick argued that it is to gain “the culture’s accumulated knowledge and the values and the appropriate skills required to pursue a career and a personal life in a capitalist society.”

Since Kirkpatrick connects education to capitalism (instead of Dewey’s connection of education to democracy), his next argument is for the privatization of education, a complete severance between government and schools. Kirkpatrick’s philosophy is built upon the work of Ayn Rand, who idealized the individual and argued against dependence on others, especially the government. The only purpose of government, she argued, was placing “the retaliatory use of physical force under objective control, i.e., under objectively defined laws.” Government only exists to ensure the autonomy of its citizens by punishing those who infringe on the liberties of others. “Government-run education, which initiates physical force by extorting money from a country’s citizens to provide education for some of the citizen’s children is clearly a violation of this premise,” Kirkpatrick argued. “The only moral educational system that recognizes the volitional nature of human beings is a free-market educational system of competing, for profit learning services.” Education in this view is not a public good, freely offered to all citizens, but rather a private commodity to be produced, packaged, and sold. “So, in the free market, who will pay for the education of the poor?” he asked rhetorically. “Why, the poor, of course . . .

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4 Ibid., 12.
5 Ibid., 18.
6 Ibid., 22.
8 Kirkpatrick, 109.
is a staple that everyone who has children must budget for.”

SDL pedagogies, since they are built upon the concepts of freedom and autonomy, provide oxygen to this libertarian school of thought. Most SDL learning environments are housed in private schools, though there have been numerous examples of SDL public schools over the decades. The inability of public-school districts to move toward learner autonomy on a large scale has caused many educators to move from seeing themselves as reformers, opting instead to leave the public education system behind.

Wain put it like this:

Undoubtedly the contemporary neo-liberal discourse of lifelong learning . . . has corrupted an earlier agenda by redescribing the ideal of the self-directed learner differently, tying it in with consumeristic aspirations and with the neo-liberal politics of responsibilising individuals for their own learning, thus dispensing the state from any responsibility for the learning society.

This acknowledgement—that SDL pedagogies are connected to movements aimed at the complete privatization of education—raises important questions that must be reckoned with:

- What is the responsibility of the government in the education of its citizens?
- Are SDL pedagogies (and their focus on learner autonomy) incompatible with a view of education as a public good?
- Does embracing SDL pedagogies necessitate embracing school choice?
- How have micro school franchises impacted the discourse of privatization?
- What is the relationship between capitalism and education?

This paper will close with an examination of these questions. It must be acknowledged that each of these questions is worthy of its own essay. As such, they will not be adequately addressed in this study. They cannot, however, be ignored.

Privatization and the Death of Democracy

First, the obvious must be stated: education has never been fair and equal in this country.

The quality of education one could access has always been tied to socio-cultural factors: one’s gender, race, zip code, income level, religious beliefs, citizenship status, parental influence, social capital—all of these (and more) affect the type of educational opportunities a person has access to. I, as a white, middle-class male, had a lot of advantages in my educational journey, but still attended a chronically under-funded public high school in rural Appalachia that was shuttered in 2011 due to a dwindling tax base. My educational opportunities were limited by growing up in a small, impoverished mountain town.

Still, though, I achieved a level of education that fostered the skills needed to be a literate, competent problem-solver, capable of basic scientific inquiry and equipped with a broad understanding of world history. Yes, the public school system in general (and my former school in particular) needs a major re-imagining. That, however, cannot be the motivating factor for dismantling public education. For our democracy to survive, education must work for everyone, not just those who can pay a premium for it.

9 Ibid., 181
10 For example, see James Bellanco, Arline Paul, & Mark Paul, Becoming Self-Directed Learners (Rolling Meadows, IL: Windy City Publishers, 2008).
Privatization will do two things. First, it will widen the gap between those that have access to capital (economic and social) and those that do not. A recent Harvard study found that over the last fifty years, the percentage of middle-class students enrolled in private schools was cut in half, while upper class enrollment remained steady (Murnane et al, 2018). A possible explanation for this is the rising cost of private tuition, placing these schools out of reach for all but the wealthy. Another is the competitive nature of school admissions, which may prioritize families that can give generous donations to the school. Whatever the reasons for this decline in middle-class private school enrollment, it reflects a larger economic trend: the income gap between the upper and middle class is increasing. The same study looked at what they called the “90-50 gap,” which is the difference between the income levels of the 90th and 50th percentiles of families with school-aged children. In the mid-1970s, the annual income for the 90th percentile of families with school aged children was $111,000, roughly double the $56,000 annual income for the 50th percentile. By 2013, the 90th percentile were earning nearly triple the annual salary of the 50th (at a rate of approximately $184,000 to $68,000).

The gap is widening. The move toward total privatization of schooling would only accelerate the trend. Wealthy children would continue to attend wealthy schools and be tracked for success. Profitiers would prey on lower- and middle-class families, promising opportunities and upward mobility while delivering education at the lowest cost/highest profit. School design of the past century has purposely tried to mimic the factory. Privatization would make that journey complete, unashamedly turning learning into a packaged product.

Now is not the time for government to shrink back from public education, but rather to finally and fully invest into it. Horace Mann believed it to be the great equalizer in American society. John Dewey saw education as intrinsically connected to maintaining a democratic society. Again, the argument here is not that public education has actually achieved these ideals. Rather, the argument is that now, perhaps more than ever, is the time to lean even more into these ideals—to aspire to an education system that strengthens our social contracts rather than continues to strain them.

This is why education must be a public good. If the purpose of education were only developing marketable skills, as Kirkpatrick claims, and profit were the only metric of a school’s success, then our schools would cease to be anything other than centers for career training. For far too long, schools have operated on that basis. Recent political events in the U.S. highlight what happens when you have a population disconnected from a critical examination of history, who have failed to build the skills necessary to argue, debate, and critically examine truth claims. The very existence of the U.S. government and the well-being of its society necessitate an educated citizenry.

So, are SDL pedagogies (with their focus on learner autonomy) incompatible with viewing education as a public good? SDL environments have predominantly existed in small private schools, well outside of the mandates of public education. What this paper argues is that SDL pedagogies are not just niche education philosophies available only to the small segment of the American public than can pay for them. Rather, these SDL pedagogies, as attested by centuries of education theory and practice, provide a way to enact an education system that fosters both

the individual skills needed to learn for oneself and the community-centered competencies to learn to live together. SDL pedagogies are not incompatible with public education, but instead may be the key to salvaging the very notion of education as a public good.

For this to be true, SDL must be protected against its own recent successes. Franchises like Acton Academy have created a streamlined process that allows aspiring school leaders to launch a new school out of their home on a shoestring budget. This approach has gained momentum during the education shifts brought on by the COVID-19 pandemic. Three years ago, the first Acton Academy launched in Georgia. Now, there are five, with even more in the works. Proponents of the approach see this rapidly expanding network as the answer to a bloated and outdated public education system that has increasingly stripped agency from teachers and learners alike in the move toward standardization. The successful growth of these SDL spaces, though, weakens investment in public education and continues to reify a vision of school as a business model. Can SDL be embraced without forsaking a commitment to public education?

What is the answer? History provides some assistance in illuminating potential pathways forward. At the turn of the 20th century, John Dewey oversaw a laboratory school at the University of Chicago. Dewey was a proponent of public education, though critical of the pedagogies entrenched in teacher education programs and replicated in schoolhouses. The lab school was just that—a place to experiment with pedagogical approaches and curriculum design that placed the learner at the center of the learning project. The goal for Dewey was not to replace public education with a network of private or university-based elementary schools. Rather, Dewey’s vision was to use the lab school as a testing ground whose influence would radiate outward, into other universities, teacher’s colleges, and school districts. The lab school—though intentionally designed in opposition to the educational approach of traditional schools—was created to save public education, not destroy it.13 Likewise, the proliferation of SDL spaces in recent years provides ample opportunities for researchers, policymakers, and pedagogues to see learner-led education in action.

Micro-Schools as Lab Schools

In recent years, I co-founded an institute housed within a small SDL school.

The goal of the Institute for Self-Directed Learning is to take all that is being learned through experimentation with SDL pedagogies in a prek-12 setting and share this information widely with public school partners. Part of the work is teacher-specific (for example, how can teachers in public schools make micro-moves towards SDL in their own classrooms?), part of the work is at the district level, partnering with school leaders to launch SDL public schools (sometimes as school-within-school options), and part of the work is at the policy level, working to create the sort of research that might convince policymakers that public education really is worth the investment, and that SDL pedagogies have much to say to current problems in the design and functioning of the nation’s public education system.

The Institute emerged from The Forest School, a prek-12 self-directed learning environment south of Atlanta, Georgia. At The Forest School, see Katherine Mayhew & Anna Edwards, *The Dewey School: The Laboratory School of the University of Chicago, 1896-1903* (New York, NY: D. Appleton-Century Company, 1936).
School, educators are called guides (not teachers). Guides neither teach nor lecture, but rather through Socratic questioning guide learners to set daily learning goals and reflect on their progress. As opposed to modes of schools that position the adult as supreme authority and ultimate knowledge-holder, SDL spaces like The Forest School position the adult as an encourager and supporter. This is a reimagining of the role of educators and learners in a school setting. Therefore, part of the work of the Institute for Self-Directed Learning is setting up workshops, courses, and webinars for educators to explore what it looks like to practice Socratic guiding and facilitate SDL experiences.

Another role of the Institute is to produce research around SDL. There are centuries worth of exemplars of learner-led schools in a variety of cultural settings. However, there is a lack of research (qualitative and quantitative alike) around these learning environments. The Institute is designing and implementing a research agenda that will study (among other things) the experiences and progress of neurodiverse learners (youth with diagnosed learning disabilities) in self-directed spaces, SDL as an equity enabler, the connection between e-learning technology and SDL, and SDL and character education. This research will be submitted for publication in journals and presented at conferences. Another key part of the Institute’s research agenda is to create literature reviews around SDL topics to serve as a resource hub for those looking to explore learner-led pedagogies.

Finally, the Institute also offers consultation services to public and private schools. These can be light-touch advisory sessions to help clients brainstorm ways to promote learner agency and SDL in their learning spaces. These can also be immersive partnerships to support clients as they build new schools or programs. The Institute has partnered with public school districts, independent school networks, non-profit educational organizations, and established private schools. These partners can visit The Forest School and access the school’s curriculum. This sort of collaboration between public and private partners is key to widely sharing SDL pedagogies and practices.

**Conclusion**

The success of private micro-school franchises could accelerate the slow death of education as a public good, or this recent boom in SDL school startups could help inject public education with the sort of imagination that reformers and philosophers have been calling for for centuries. The impetus is on those of us in the fields of progressive and alternative education to remain vigilant in casting a vision of education that has at its aim both the flourishing of the individual as well as the maintenance of democracy.

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Educator Perspectives on Both Sides of the Pandemic: Inspirations Taken from Hamilton

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The year is 2020; it is unrecognizable to students, parents, and teachers. While struggling daily to redefine what pandemic teaching is—interwoven with the stress of surviving the disease, or even managing at-home life—teachers are challenged to be innovative in new ways. They are called to be agile, creative, digitally fluent, and responsive to varied models of instructional delivery. Hours are spent balancing home and work while designing virtual lessons, developing engaging activities, learning new technology and remote-teaching strategies, as well as determining which students may be lost along the way.

It is widely recognized and documented that not all districts are resourced the same way. Accordingly, the tools for both accessibility and ready-to-go technology impact new instructional models. This is compounded by the complex rollout of instructional methodologies across the nation, and uncertainty for the future.

As schools have returned to in-class instruction for fall 2021, teachers have once again adapted their instructional models. In this way, multilingual learners, students with disabilities, and other vulnerable subgroups of students will continue to require special attention to receive accelerated instruction, and more personalized learning opportunities. Additionally, teachers need specific strategies to foster reentry into the routines of in-person learning through easy transitions while also addressing academic gains and losses.

This challenge must also address the impact the pandemic had on students’ social emotional well-being. In this article, we will examine inequities—and many unexpected successes—that became apparent during the pandemic and continue to impact schools and communities. Furthermore, we will illuminate how teachers, schools, and districts can reposition for the future of education.

Along the way, we borrow a few lines from the musical Hamilton to both anchor our discussion and inspire our readers.1

Why Hamilton? The less commonly known story of one of our founding fathers, Alexander Hamilton, is retold by Lin-Manuel Miranda in a revolutionary way, using a range of contemporary musical choices and a highly inclusive cast, predominantly featuring emerging actors of color. What also inspires us about Hamilton is that it is an immigrant story with a recurring message of resilience, a need for change, and a struggle to make a difference.

The pandemic has brought us to a point when “history has its eyes on us”—thus, we took inspiration to share our perspective on this pivotal moment in time.

Who Will Tell Your Story? The Voices that Matter the Most

During the pandemic, we spoke formally and informally with teachers around the country, and

much of what we heard depended on their States’ requirements for teaching.

Some districts had students in schools for face-to-face learning. Others had only the teachers in school, offering instruction through Zoom. Most districts experimented, and alternated between simultaneous, concurrent, hybrid, synchronous, and asynchronous options. Some teachers reported minimal instructional success, while others found exciting pathways which included virtual laboratories, international guest speakers, more parental interaction, and other rich curricular online options.

Some educators report that the existence of new technologies—such as Flipgrid, Nearpod, Padlet, and Jamboard—mean that they will never quite teach the way they did before. One teacher stated, “I will have to modify my instruction and my thinking to create a culture in my room where ALL are included 100% of the time.” She added, “Bottomline, it will take me hours to prepare, practice, and organize; yet, eventually I’ll get as good at hybrid instruction as I have with virtual instruction, as the tapestry of education has forever changed. There’s no going back. It’s here to stay.”

In addition to the informal phone conversations, Zoom chats, and Google meets with colleagues, educator-friends, in-service and preservice teachers, we also conducted a large-scale survey with over 450 respondents. We were mostly interested in how they have been able to support their multilingual learners during the pandemic, and what their future hopes and concerns are as we begin a new academic year. There were several Likert’s-scales, and some open-ended questions, so participating educators could describe their experiences and articulate their expectations for the future.

Regarding their COVID-realities, we asked the participants the following:

Thinking back to this difficult journey we have been on since the middle of March [of 2020], what are the most important lessons you have learned as an educator serving English language learners (ELLs) via remote learning in a time of crisis? You can respond with a list of words, a few quick phrases, a few sentences or offer a more comprehensive answer if you wish to do so.

These anonymous narratives show that educators have been sincerely concerned about their

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ability or opportunity (or lack thereof) to connect with their students and their families. Frequently cited causes for this include communication barriers, and lack of access to technology (including devices and reliable Internet access). Participants also shared their deep commitment. Namely, the extraordinary amount of time and effort it took them to reach out to their students in hopes to stay connected as they were learning from home (or in a hybrid setting), and to meet their academic priorities. We captured all the written responses in the first of our two word clouds.

In addition, we also surveyed the respondents regarding their future plans, and expectations; trying to uncover both individual, and collective next steps. We gathered answers to the following question:

What are your own (or your school's/district's) professional plans to be better prepared for next fall? You can respond with a list of words, a few quick phrases, a few sentences or offer a more comprehensive answer if you wish to do so.

The participants demonstrated heartfelt compassion and concern for their students. They emphasized a need to be mindful of the families’ and children’s well-being, and the urgency of staying connected with them. They also noted the mismatch between students’ home lives, and other realities; especially when schoolwork is delivered remotely. Moreover, they underscored the need for well-designed, on-going support for their students’ academic learning and social-emotional well-being. Many recognized that the future is full of unknowns. They informed us that their plans were still in progress; they did not feel prepared and had no clear guidelines on how to get ready for a post-pandemic school year. The second of our word clouds captures the written responses.

Teacher Voices-Hamilton Lens

At the onset of the pandemic, Hamilton the musical became available through Disney Plus, allowing families to view a Broadway production while social distancing.

Like many others, we have been drawn to the brilliance of the lyrics, the music, the rich and the complex historical references, and the
creative interpretation of the past. The following are some of the most poignant lines from the musical, partnered with teacher comments—all with the pandemic as the historical background:

The world will never be the same. Many educators recognize that what we are living through will make it into the history books. How we respond to the challenges and opportunities—that this once-in-a-century global crisis brought—influence not only our daily habits and classroom routines, but also our pedagogy. Since the winter of 2020, there have been new practices for hygiene, communication, demonstrations of affection, and so on!

Our instructional choices have also pivoted to include varied technology-based opportunities for students to access complex grade-level content, and relevant global topics of interest. Teachers have learned to highlight global connectedness and real-life applications through authentic experiences for children. In turn, students have learned to demonstrate their new understandings, critical thinking skills, and ways of expressing themselves through multiple modalities using academic text, visual representations, music, poetry, audio/video recordings, and personal narratives:

Most of the kids and a lot of us teachers have been stressed beyond belief with this virus taking over the world, and sometimes it feels like trying to shoehorn some sense of "normality" into this intensely abnormal situation is futile. I think that's mainly a feeling akin to grieving, but it's very widespread and intense.

Will they know what you overcame? As educators, we have returned to school with humility and openness to understanding what our students and their families might have experienced. To this point, the social-emotional lens beckons us. There is a great need to focus on how our multilingual learners, students with disabilities, and other vulnerable student populations navigate their own emotions and aspirations (as well as build relationships with others).

In our recently published book, From Equity Insights to Action: Critical Strategies for Teaching Multilingual Learners (2022), we encourage all educators to collaborate and talk about the different perspectives of teachers, parents, communities, and students as we return to our "new normal."

Let’s not give up the collaboration and relationship-building as we continue to harness the power of connections:

Relationships need to come first. Working with young kids in a time of crisis, uncertainty, and strange transitions does not exactly create ideal conditions for learning, let alone language development. I think my biggest mistake was to assume that the epidemic situation would be much more temporary than it was, and I had unreasonable expectations for my students' capacity for resilience, self-management, and learning accountability. If I could do it all again, I would slow the train down and focus on maintaining contact and approachability with my students before trying to do any meaningful instruction.

Have I done enough? It must not be forgotten that we have lived through collective trauma and daily uncertainties like never before. During the

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3 Said during the introduction of Alexander Hamilton, the Company reminds the audience that Hamilton rewrote the game, and the world will be changed forever.
5 Said during the introduction, the Company also wonders whether the audience and future generations will understand and appreciate Hamilton’s journey.
8 In the Afterstory, Eliza Hamilton addresses the audience directly with her reflection on whether she has done enough to carry on her husband’s legacy.
hardest months of the pandemic, we frequently reminded educators and ourselves to give grace and accept that family situations may abruptly change. As educators, let’s continue to find ways to overcome the self-doubt and fatigue that the pandemic continues to cause.

We also need to resist a return to former inequitable practices, and instead intentionally disrupt traditional approaches that do not serve our most vulnerable and historically-marginalized students:

Our district did an amazing job with remote learning. I’m humbled by the strength of our teachers and coaches that never allowed this challenge to affect students negatively. They checked in with students via Zoom, conducted mini lessons, & small group instruction; had parent meetings, distributed & delivered food, shared resources on counseling, and engaged students throughout.9

Look around, look around, how lucky we are to be alive right now.10 In the wake of COVID-19, numerous reports concluded that there was staggering and disproportionate impacts on communities of color, families living in poverty, and those without access to the Internet; namely, inequitable education, mental health, and other resources and services. Despite all the challenges and struggles, many students demonstrated academic and social resilience. Furthermore, some parents supporting their children with school-related and social-emotional challenges developed a new-found appreciation for purpose of schools:

I’ve learned that I had to engage parents 1:1 to assist me with creating a learning environment for their child. I had to first educate the parent, so that they could aid in the learning process.11

There is a million things I have not done, just you wait!12 There is an urgency as we return to the physical classroom to bring fresh energy and an enhanced commitment to address disproportionalities as well as inequities in and outside of the school. This equity work is just beginning and will require a dual lens.

First, educators need to reconnect with their students and address their social emotional learning by creating a safe and supportive classroom environment. By setting a positive and affirming emotional climate, we can also develop students’ agency through co-created and co-developed curriculums:

Right now, it’s hard to plan since there is no clear idea of what the fall will look like. I hope to spend some time exploring new programs and thinking of new ways to be flexible in a learning plan that can be implementing online and/or in real life.13

From our research and survey data, we have come to firmly believe that self-reflective opportunities did grow out of the pandemic as most people worked and attended school from home. As students and teachers peered out their windows daily, both literally and figuratively—and in many ways the world seemed to have turned upside down—the time to examine personal hopes and dreams was current. In addition, for those who monitored hospital rates, deaths, and financial impacts there were new lenses of inequities that could simply not be ignored.

Resilience, self-reliance, strategies for coping, and agency are essential dispositions that we

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10 Said when the Schuyler Sisters are introduced in the play, their exuberance is captured in a song that highlights their fierce energy and passion for life.
12 Alexander Hamilton’s eagerness to bring about change is a recurring line in the play suggesting that there is so much more that needs to be done to serve his country.
should not give up by going back to our former ways of living.

What Have We Given Up? What Have We Gained?

Our students have developed new skillsets!

They have learned how to participate in virtual meetings and nurtured their leadership skills. Students stepped up to help teachers who did not have the technological background to problem-solve online issues and often were co-hosts during Zoom sessions or assisted in monitoring chats. Many students demonstrated their confidence and competence using computers and taking responsibility for their own learning. Anecdotal evidence already indicates that increased self-directed learning and executive functioning activities were positive unintended outcomes of the pandemic.

Did that mean that all students benefited?

No. Clearly, there were students who did not attend class regularly or at all, did not have the needed technology, or barely participated.

We have learned about a growing number of social-emotional issues, and even suicides that plagued our most vulnerable populations. And yet, the vast number of teachers worked long hours to reach their students and provide stability during this “new normal.” They also collaborated with their colleagues to make pedagogical choices, shared shortcuts, and strategies that worked:

The teamwork of teachers was amazing as we worked closely together remotely. We were able to share the workload equally and supported each other’s students as well as our own.14

Will Teachers Stay?

As we continue to observe the worrisome spike in virus exposures and the reality of a growing number of mutations during the pandemic, we also recognize an aging population of teachers that felt they were at-risk when entering school buildings. In some districts, hiring substitute teachers became nearly impossible, even when the daily pay was raised.15 Many districts were already facing chronic teacher shortages, and this was complicated by the lack of technological savvy needed by most districts as they transitioned to online learning.

The metrics that informed the teacher shortages pre-COVID remained key concerns of district leaders, especially those in lower-income communities. These metrics included available school funding, safety, salaries that keep some teachers barely above the poverty line, under-resourced teaching and learning environments, limited professional development to support teachers for a dedicated career span, an imbalance in the selection process for teachers, and an overall lack of respect within districts as well as from external pressures and criticism.

As we reboot and reposition districts for the next possible wave of the pandemic or simply return to face-to-face instruction, it remains obvious that the need for well-prepared, quality teachers with content and pedagogical expertise will be the core of the future education of this country. The question remains: How can schools create opportunities for students to thrive?


Some Unexpected Successes

The importance of family engagement—especially for English learners and other “at-prom ise” student populations—can be found in the literature for over a decade. Tung and her colleagues stated:

The sense of collective efficacy was not confined within the school building’s walls. A key aspect of the coaches’ effectiveness was the trust that they earned from families. Because of this trust, English [language learners’] families were open to advice and feedback about their children’s classroom placement, academic progress, and additional suggested resources for their learning.16

The pandemic has once again brought this concept to the forefront, as more parents need to assist their young children in accessing the tools for remote instruction and have become an active part of the learning environment. Parents often overhear lessons if they are working nearby or share technology with their children, along with the hecticness of short class periods (characteristic of high schools) and the joy of students when they see their peers.

We already recognize that leveraging community members is one of the most powerful ways to support students of need.17 Increased family engagement in support of schools helps establish a culture of caring and mutual respect that benefits all students. During the pandemic there have been many stories of local communities sponsoring fund raising drives to buy technology, providing food when the school doors were closed, and accessing library resources in ways never tapped before.

Although we did see learning disparities, we also noted that multilingual opportunities increased, and we believe that many communities came together without personal or political agendas. The goal was the same: How can we best educate our children? This question has underscored the path that we are taking in fall 2021 (and beyond) and informs the new teaching and learning paradigm of the future.

Questions That Still Need to Be Answered for the Future

At the time of writing this article, the Delta and Omicron variants are dominating the headlines, and the CDC guidelines for mask-wearing shift frequently.

Teachers are still wondering how to reconnect with students whom they have only met virtually. But what about students who have never logged in or have logged off permanently? How many students have moved and are not registered in their new homes? Why aren’t children being registered for kindergarten?

During this unprecedented 21st century event, we have learned that “access” has many different meanings. Noam suggests that adding rituals to school programs is one way to “build strong connections between students and adults.”18 The idea of developing new bridges—and continuing to build with families and communities—is one that resonates strongly for us.

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18 Gil G. Noam, *Ten Big Bets: Transforming Education during the Pandemic and Beyond* (Pear, 2020).
Our research shows that students and families who voluntarily tune-in learn more, access more, and interact more with others. One example is the creativity displayed by museums to bring their holdings to communities at large. These institutions have been able to leverage their assets and reach more people than ever before. In some cases, allowing for free admission to exhibits, shows, concerts, and plays. Like the wider accessibility to Hamilton, it no longer matters if you can afford the ticket fee.

Conclusion

While arguments about learning loss versus learning gains continue to reverberate within districts, the pandemic has offered a unique experience to reflect on how schools can change.

As we have witnessed firsthand, many students demonstrate academic and social resilience during the pandemic. Moreover, parents have begun fostering new roles in the educational process. Now is the time to closely examine the impact on our most vulnerable students and support them with academic and social opportunities.

Closing with another borrowed line from Hamilton: “Who will tell your story?”

Who will tell our story and what will that story illuminate about the COVID-19 pandemic? Our hope is that it is a story of resilient educators, students, families, and advocates for change, and a better future for all.
(Post)Pandemic Distance Learning: Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion

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Distance Learning Policies address online, hybrid, and flipped learning for the purpose of standardizing quality for students, but there have been conflicting views—from government, educator, and student standpoints—on the purpose and consequences of online learning.

Issues related to educational access for the citizenry, while still appropriately matching technology to pedagogically sound strategies, are often discussed with particular respect to higher education. However, the COVID-19 pandemic has pushed these issues to the forefront for all students: especially the young, racially-diverse, and those from poor districts. Perhaps because of heightened awareness of deep economic and equity divides in our education system, and the need to be creative for our most vulnerable populations, further discussion related to distance learning and consequences for diverse students should be at the forefront.

This paper will describe: (1) a brief history of distance learning policies, and its relevance for today; (2) current state and federal policies governing distance learning; and (3) my perspective, as a mathematics teacher in higher education, of preferred future directions for distance learning that embraces equity, diversity, and inclusion.

Understanding Distance Learning: What is its History?

State government websites that contain remote learning policy updates are meaningful and provide helpful context for community members. To help provide context, I will refer to policies from my home state: the Ohio Department of Education’s working definitions.¹

Remote learning is defined as when teachers and students do not meet in-person; it includes both digital and analog approaches. The Ohio Department of Education explains that digital approaches deliver learning via internet and technology devices, while analog approaches deliver learning via non-digital “high-quality” paper packet materials. Another term familiar to those in higher education includes Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCS). Whereas the history of MOOCS and corresponding educational policies reach back to the 2000s, the concept of “remote distance learning” stems from the 1800s correspondence schools.²

The existence of correspondence schools was the start of accessible higher education—from a distance. It allowed for equal access to higher education for citizens from all socio-economic classes. Correspondence school learning has evolved from the use of mail for lectures and course assignments, to the use of technologically-innovative tools for MOOCS. However, there is arguably a wide range of modalities, from minimal “online exchange of course material” to


² Kate O’Connor, "MOOCs, Institutional Policy and Change Dynamics in Higher Education," Higher Education 68, no. 5 (2014), 623-635.
serious consideration of instructor–student interaction.³

Historically, distance-learning policies stem from federal and state levels. Policy regulations and discussions address fully online for-profit programs and have varied standards from state to state. Some consequences are that regulations have not protected the citizenry from a barrage of predatory for-profit university distance learning advertisements aimed at promising “a false road of prosperity” to struggling households.⁴ Current day pandemic-related online learning concerns now extend to K-16 and turn towards remote learning achievement shortfalls.

In short, all stakeholders are embroiled in reconsidering equitable democratic learning that balances academics, economic insecurity, mental health, and social skills, especially for marginalized communities.

Distance Learning Policies

While researchers continue to address the feasibility of online and blended learning, and educators debate effective online teaching strategies, our educational policymakers forge ahead with guidelines, standards, and requirements.

At the US federal level, oversight of distance-learning policies addresses the academic quality and credit value of online courses, both at the high school and post-secondary levels, and aim to protect students from rising higher education costs. Each State, and each school within the State, determines its standards and requirements, its choice of digital tools, as well as its educator preparation, and student course rigor.

This broadens college flexibility. However, it leaves students, parents, and employers responsible for understanding state reciprocity requirements and possible deviation in quality between each school’s offering. As of March 2021, Miguel Cardona has been confirmed as the twelfth Secretary of Education, and he aspires to address structural inequities that adversely affect vulnerable populations by focusing on developing a diverse teacher workforce with training and support that will address funding inequities.

There is renewed hope for educators, parents, and students to have their voices heard, and advocate for educational policies that address enduring disparities—achievement gaps, worsened by the pandemic, that are a result of “opportunity gaps.”⁵ As the consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic continue to sweep global communities, families have been pulled into an unintentional political and pedagogical experiment on remote learning.

Each child, each parent, each district, and each member of our community is realizing the importance and relevance of remote learning and educational policies.

Policy Alternatives: Transforming Distance Learning Practices

Reframing pedagogical strategies to bring about the improvement of online learning will invariably be fraught with tensions.

My perspective aligns with progressive social justice values that center on students to provide opportunities to learn and develop democratic

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skills. As a mathematics teacher, I welcome the prospects of reinventing educational practices and assessments to empower diverse students as productive contributors to society. The Biden administration’s plan to revisit federal distance learning policies may be an opportunity for states to introduce new and much needed educational policies that provide clear procedures and rules to simultaneously serve all communities and promote equitable education. We need to discuss distance learning—this includes balanced perspectives that go beyond content, to include ethics, access, special needs, culture, and social inequities. Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, arguments against distance learning revolved around the “digital divide.” At this juncture in time, the pandemic has forced us to immerse education in technology and remoteness.

It is important to have local, state, and federal funds to provide access to technology, as well as funds that can support student welfare concerns, such as food and housing insecurity. This means cost-effectiveness is not an appropriate metric for success—we need to rethink societal and pedagogical needs for opportunities to meet student needs.

Taking advantage of flexible remote learning policies to enhance social justice concerns is imperative. We must reinvent pedagogical strategies and practices that match the many needs of the moment.\(^6\)

**Conclusion**

When considering issues of equity, such as race, socioeconomic status, and disability, the existing remote learning policy has failed the most vulnerable.

It seems the Biden administration aims to focus on this funding. As a community, we can take advantage of flexible requirements to rethink pedagogical practices and address issues of equity. If stakeholders do not engage in community dialogue to help reimagine education, then we have missed an opportunity to address the needs of our most vulnerable society members, our children.

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Loving School in the Time of Corona: Navigating Educational Uncertainty in Alaska

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Last week I learned a game called “Mouse in Ground.”

The kids line up on the side of the “tag inbound” area with their eyes closed. I, their teacher, walk around very quietly, and very slowly tag one child on the head. That kid is it. At that point, I say, “Go.” The kids then run out of the “eyes closed” area and into the “eyes open” area before the mystery “it” kid can get to them. Watching them play together, stumbling around and giggling, I am grateful to have students back in school.

However, I cannot push the reality of our new educational situation from my mind. Last year was hard for students—and teachers. This year is harder.

The COVID pandemic began as I was completing work to obtain my Master’s in Education in the spring of 2020. Emboldened by a childhood enthusiasm for diseases, I decided I would use the pandemic as the context for my thesis project. This was during the first part of the pandemic when it was all still a bit exciting. And, frankly, because I didn’t understand what it meant to be in a pandemic—I had a lot to learn.

I wanted to know what it was that impacted parent choice—how did parents formulate educational decisions for their children in an era when the choices offered were unclear, unpredictable, and everything felt much unknown? Originally, I thought the six months that I conducted interviews (July 2020 – December 2020) were going to cover a major portion of the pandemic.

That was a year ago.

The parents who participated were mothers, but this was not on purpose; these participants volunteered. The project began with a series of guiding questions to gather information about their households and lives; how they were coping—juggling their lives while also managing the education of their children. After six months of interviews, and hours of recordings later, the mothers—rather predictably with the exception of a select few—were found to be working extremely hard and were extremely tired.

Education looked very different last year at this time. When school opened in the fall of 2020, our district’s mitigation plan relied heavily on social distancing, masking, and a tiered risk-level approach. This sent teachers and students home to work remotely if the infection rate was too high. The mitigation plan was based on protocols set by the state (similar to many states nationwide). For parents that had to navigate inflexible work schedules, this was a particular challenge.

One parent, who manages a daycare, whose husband is in the Coast Guard, and who has her own three school-aged kids at home, responded, “Right now, school work is happening after daycare. Which is really hard. I get done and I’m ready to help and then he is asleep or everybody’s hungry. So, I am exhausted because I have had to pick up more hours because of COVID. I used to be open from 7 am -5:30 pm. And now my first kid comes at 5:30 am and my last kid leaves at 8 pm. And I have been open on weekends. So some weeks I am working seven days a week” (Oct. 2020).

This year, while school districts have made mitigation plans more accommodating for working parents, they have simultaneously increased
the chances that children will be sent home to quarantine as “close-contacts” by removing mask-mandates and other mitigation strategies. Thus, not only placing additional pressure on teachers, but also reversing any alleviation of stress on the parents they were hoping to support. All the while, putting families and educators at additional risk of infection.

This year the district ordered that all schools go “back to normal.” As a result, students are scattered around classrooms trying to maximize the area. Some are wearing masks; some are not. Nevertheless, there is no way to individually space kids out so that they are not considered close contacts in the event of a positive case in a classroom. Especially, if they are not all consistently wearing masks.

Last fall, parents felt the pressure of managing businesses while keeping their kids at home and in some cases trying to coordinate with Special Ed staff in order to address IEP concerns. Some parents—in an effort to create study spaces—cut out boxes as dividers so their kids would have space to do work without interference from siblings. This is an instance of hard-working people turning even more resourceful in a time of need.

Unfortunately, the resources, support, and flexibility that was available to families and schools last year can no longer be depended on. It now feels very much like we—teachers—are fighting this on our own. Even more harrowing—that we are fighting against the very communities we are trying to support.

Throughout the timeline of this project, in spite of the fact that there was a pandemic raging through our world, there was a hopeful sense that education might innovate—getting a much needed makeover with all the systems required to not only successfully implement dual platforms simultaneously, but also to gain nuance and forward-thinking that rural education—along with education in all spaces—desperately needs if it is to thrive in the future.

This is not what happened.

Let’s go back to the first summer after the pandemic started. The pressures of working while assisting kids with remote school increased as we continued remote learning into the fall of 2020. The stories told by the participants were not extraordinary or unusual. They mirrored what many families were going through.

“Yes. It’s been gradual. I really noticed it the week before Thanksgiving break . . . For my daughter, she really misses having a relationship with her teachers. That relationship is always really important to her . . . She loved school. She is a very enthusiastic student. She will get it done. But I see a lack of caring about the quality of her work . . . It’s gonna be like a year of summer, getting them to get back to go to school” (December 2020).

Teachers had to figure out how to quarantine their children while also doing their job. This included facilitating education for their own children, after contract hours, well into the evening. A particularly challenging logistical (and mental and emotional) feat for single mothers.

It was especially challenging for low-income families, for those with less flexible work schedules, or for families with younger children. These challenges—exacerbated by a year of remote learning in inconsistent home-learning conditions—are still with us. These challenges will echo into our students’ future, and our future workforce, if we do not actively choose to reform our schools: closing gaps in equity and providing better access to quality education for all.

Indeed, not all parents fared poorly last year. Some people preferred the flexibility in their households: “I actually have her going to a tutor’s house. She goes there every day for the whole day. And she teaches them all their curriculum, which has been just amazing . . . So my two kids [who are homeschooled] have it really well . . . So for my son he has a teacher that comes in three days a week. Mostly just tutors
him on reading and visualizing and things like that. He is doing excellent” (November 2020).

Parents differed in how they fared depending on the age of their children and resources available in their households. COVID, like cholera, and so many other diseases before it, is a social pandemic as well as a viral one.

One parent summarized many of the factors impacting some families more than others, “Well, ya know, I think that we were lucky because we have done different deliveries of school previously . . . We have homeschooled before, public school, we had a child we sent to private school. So we are flexible enough. But honestly . . . I don’t know if I could do this without a child who was in a higher grade . . . I think there are a lot of socioeconomic differences that make it really challenging for some families and a lot of kids get lost” (November 2020).

The social impacts of this virus have disproportionately affected certain populations and deepened fissures of inequality in our communities. The effects of COVID last year reverberated in classrooms this year. You can see test scores slipping, and more and more time spent on social and emotional learning—re-teaching many students how to interact in socially appropriate ways. Furthermore, you see teachers leaving in droves.

There is incredible pressure to get students caught up and “back to normal.” Meanwhile, there is a magnifying lens on education. An expectation that teachers should be able to raise a phoenix from ashes.

This pandemic has brought it all to the surface. We cannot un-see the gaps in education after this year. It is nearly impossible to teach to the standards, meet the current social and emotional needs of students, and single-handedly invigorate education. Even if you are the most positive educator in the world—one wonders, in the far recesses of the brain, if these kids are going to make it.

In short, we cannot do this alone.

October 11, 2021:

The first quarter ends next Friday. There are about eight school weeks in a quarter, but I have only had a consistent class for the last three. Since there are no mask requirements, students sitting within six feet of each other for any extended time—aggregated 15 minutes throughout the school day—are sent home if a student tests positive.

For a couple weeks, I operated with seven children in class. Functioning without a hybrid option, “close-contact” kids went home with their Chromebooks, and depending on their grade level, whatever work they could manage.

Many students, especially those with siblings or parents who were sick, were absent for most of the first quarter. This is 25% of their school year. During the last week of the first quarter, I finally got all my students back into class together after a series of quarantines.

Last year was hard because we, as teachers, were doing multiple jobs—we were training ourselves while teaching, and, as a result, were emotionally drained. This year is harder, because all of the planning and resources for “COVID School” are no longer in place to support us in our jobs. However, we are still battling the impact of COVID on our schools, communities, and selves.

The recommendations for how to uplift families based on evidence collected from this project converge with those that support local institutions and public education in general. Throughout the scope of this project, and during the process of reflection, this pandemic has forced to the surface some hard realities of education that community members, parents, constituents, and taxpayers will need to contend with if they are interested in preserving the great equalizer of our nation, and our most unifying public institution: public schools.
Educators and families need to see leadership make decisions that stabilize classrooms and retain teachers. We need to address this moment of cultural decision-making. We need to decide who we want to be as a community, state, and nation. We need to make this choice every day. We need to choose to support mothers, fund early education, and elect policy officials who will make living in rural spaces a viable option for families—and not just create beautiful spaces and communities for those who can afford to reach such economic echelons.

The parents who suffered the most during this pandemic are the people we need to be lifting up the most. We need to ensure that they have opportunities for growth in our towns. They are the people working in the background—those keeping our small communities alive.

We need to choose to cultivate an educated and healthy population over capital gains. Until we are ready to make that choice and address the current destabilization of our towns, we will be gambling with our communities’ futures. And when will we decide to truly value mothers?

Are we willing to address the connectedness between a healthy student population and a robust national workforce? Are we ready to confront the fact that education is an investment in our society—and that if we do not make these choices carefully, we risk losing everything?

Mouse on Ground

Navigating the pandemic has felt a lot like Mouse on Ground.

Last year we played with our eyes closed, and we were all figuring out the limitations of our new environment as we worked. This year, our eyes are open, but our hands are tied. We teachers are daunted by the task of constantly defending ourselves and our families from COVID—and from decisions handed down from above.

This year I am grateful to be back at school and working with a classroom of kids. I know we all are. I hope that, in five years, we are still here, working hard at what we do. I hope that things are better.

I hope that we do not wait for things to get worse before we act to retain professionals and support families that make this place home. The insight gained from the project was invaluable in understanding how parents were making choices, how they were affected, and how they coped during the fall of 2020.

My new question is: how will these families continue to hang on?
Belonging, Places, and Digital Spaces: A Value-Creative Inquiry

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Belonging is increasingly recognized as a missing feature of contemporary life.

As neighbors no longer talk to neighbors, children no longer play after school in the local park, church membership declines, and jobs become more siloed, people exist in more and more isolated bubbles. In the midst of this social dynamic, the need to foster belonging has been identified as essential not only for mental health in general, but also for diversity, equity, and inclusion efforts.¹

Furthermore, in the aftermath of the murder of George Floyd and other racial violence, attention to the need for culturally responsive teaching and sense of belonging of students of color has heightened. Yet, educational institutions have been slow to respond to the need to cultivate belonging, and teachers and students alike struggle to cope with feelings of pressure, isolation, and anxiety. The situation has been exacerbated during the isolation enforced by the global pandemic. As two instructors in higher education who value belonging, we find ourselves grappling with how to create belonging in this new Zoom, hybrid, Teams, trimodal, Google Meet, asynchronous, synchronous, digital world.

The COVID pandemic forced many higher education faculty into a new digital space, a space lacking the physicality of a place, an abstract space where we were challenged to continue functioning, as much as possible, according to the normalcy we had prior to the pandemic. We desperately tried to push through and make do with whatever technological abilities we could quickly acquire. However, in retrospect, this new experience brought into sharp relief something we had been struggling with but not closely attending to until the double punch of George Floyd’s murder and the pandemic—belonging. Like many people who have reevaluated their lives during the pandemic, we felt compelled to reexamine our understanding of belonging and community. As extended periods of isolation spread among family, students, and colleagues, we, too, were affected in both visible and subtle ways.

Thus, in this paper we investigate our own relationship to belonging and how we challenged ourselves to foster a sense of belonging with our students and colleagues as we transitioned from a physical place to a digital space. We conduct a value-creative inquiry into the role of belonging through the dialogic sharing of our personal and professional histories. We begin by recounting personal experiences of belonging and its absence. These narratives, originally uncovered through duoethnographic inquiry,² illustrate connections between a sense of belonging and the place of school and inform our current efforts to cultivate belonging in our classrooms and in our professional relationships with colleagues. Next, we examine how, in response to pandemic conditions, we find that without a

¹ Floyd Cobb and John Krownapple, Belonging through a Culture of Dignity: The Keys to Successful Equity Implementation (San Diego, CA: Mimi & Todd Press, 2019).

shared place, we must be more explicit and intentional about creating a community and sense of belonging. In the discussion section, we examine Block’s five principles of strategy to build community\(^3\) as we reflect on our experiences during COVID. Finally, we consider what aspects of our experiences during COVID we will carry forward into our post-pandemic classrooms.

**Belonging and Place**

Located geographically in a mid-point between the authors’ residences, Krema, a coffee shop frequented by locals in a small Illinois town, has served as a place of belonging for us. Once you enter the cafe, the dim, warm lights and the faint jazz music in the background welcome you into the open space. When you step in further, there are eight colorful paintings on one side of the wall that represent significant figures from diverse backgrounds and periods, many of whom fought for justice and civil rights. In a small, predominantly white, Midwestern town, such a wall makes a statement. Although the clerks do not always greet us by name, it is a place where we feel welcome. As we meet in this place and engage in deep dialogues about our personal lives and our teaching experiences and collaborate on research projects, it has become a place where we experience a sense of belonging.

Block posits that the term *belong* has two meanings.\(^4\) The first meaning is to be a part of something and to know that you are not alone or an outsider. The second meaning is to feel ownership, accountability, and agency from being a part of something. Through belonging, human beings begin to recognize their connectedness and develop their capacity to empathize and care for others. As we work in parallel at the cafe that has become so familiar to us, we feel like we are not alone; we are in “our” coffee shop, a place where friendship and agency exist. We appreciate the banter of the servers behind the counter and enjoy the sense of fellowship with the friends group chatting excitedly at the table next to us, the studious young man focused on his computer screen, and the elderly couple enjoying their lattes in peaceful companionship.

We first discovered the significance of belonging in our own lives when we began exploring our past educational experiences through duoethnography research. We realized that, as children, we sometimes experienced schools as places of belonging, but at other times, we felt as though we were outsiders. In addition, due to our individual social positions, our experiences of belonging were quite different. Our experiences confirmed what research has found: that a sense of belonging is a fundamental and psychological human need to feel connected to a certain

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\(^4\) Block, *Community*. 
person, group, or place. Belonging provides a sense of security that connects to well-being and away from feelings of isolation. As we found, the human need to belong begins early in childhood and continues throughout adulthood.

Revisiting our work now, during the pandemic, we realize the significance of place in our memories of belonging. When we belong, we belong somewhere. Our memories of both belonging and being outsiders are all tied to specific places: a young Julie, staring through doors at her mother, panicked at almost getting left behind in a subway car in New York City. A young Melissa, swimming in the lake, watching grown-ups stop by in their boats at all times of the day to sit on the patio, play a game of euchre, or drink a beer. Elementary student Julie, US-born citizen, feeling like a perpetual outsider—a foreigner—when she went to school and was assigned into an ESL (now called ELL) program because she was quiet in class; in graduate school, being mistaken as someone “visiting” from another country as she walked through the campus hallway. Elementary student Melissa, understanding after hearing Julie’s experience that she always felt like she belonged to her small Catholic school but also felt left out of the friends’ group, wishing she lived in town, where some of her classmates had lots of siblings and friends who played together in the neighborhood. This led us to wonder, can belonging exist without a physical place?

As Donald notes, place is generally used to indicate location. A place has unique qualities that foster affinity. Space, on the other hand, is a more abstract notion. Donald argues that space has displaced place in curriculum, leading to neglect of the intimate connections a place gives to life and living. Through the notion of space, the particularities of a place only matter when they serve as an abstract domain; place is thus “transformed into an empty space ready to be occupied by the anthropocentric imagination.” Further, standardization, which allows curriculum to be applied anywhere, promotes a lack of attention to particularities of place. Meaningful connections are lost as place is “framed largely as the anthropocentric space within which humans unilaterally think the world into being.”

When viewed from this perspective, a digital space provides particular challenges to teachers and students who seek belonging.

School as a Place of Belonging

Studies have shown the importance of belonging in schools.

A sense of belonging—the subjective feeling of deep connection with social groups, physical places, and individual and collective experiences—is a fundamental human need that predicts numerous mental, physical, social, economic, and behavioural outcomes. Goodenow defined belonging in schools as “students’ sense of being accepted, valued, included and encouraged” by their teachers and peers in their

8 Donald, “Place,” 158.
9 Donald, “Place,” 159.
classroom interactions. In other words, students feel they are an integral part of the school. Other studies have connected this basic human need of connectedness and relatedness to motivation. In particular, studies have shown how feelings of inclusion or connectedness affect a person’s intrinsic motivation. Similarly, in the context of schools, studies explore the connections of belongingness to learners’ engagement and academic motivation. When students’ sense of belonging is high, there are also indications of higher academic success. In comparison, Abdollahi, Panahipour, Akhavan, and Allen suggest that students with a low sense of belonging might exhibit higher levels of academic stress. Based on a comprehensive review of school belonging, St-Amand, Girard, and Smith suggest there are four key attributes important for school belonging, including positive emotions, positive relations with peers and students, willingness to be involved, and ability to be nimble and harmonize in any situation.

One of the dimensions to belonging is place: a place that is shared and created by those who act within a shared location. While place-based belonging is minimally explored in scholarship, it has been defined as the affective feeling of being at home in a place. Such a place can be a home, a classroom, a workplace or a neighborhood. In such places, where people care about the place, the people in it, and negotiate its use, it can become a place of meaning and belonging. In particular, a caring education focused on relations and connectedness has continuity of place. Adopting Dewey’s notion of continuity, Noddings proposes four dimensions of continuity: purpose, people, place, and curriculum. These dimensions of continuity help build stability and structure for relations and care to develop in schools. In particular, we focus specifically on continuity of place, given that we are experiencing a time when changing contexts create instability in students’ homes, communities, and social structures. In 2020, the pandemic disrupted whatever continuity of place students had experienced in school up to that point, disrupting the emotional relationship a student might experience with their school environment.

Exploring Our Experiences of Belonging

To explore the fundamental need to belong, we begin with our personal experiences of

13 Goodenow, “Classroom Belonging among Early Adolescent Students.”
belonging and alienation in schools. We review our childhood experiences, and then consider some key moments in adulthood when we found or created places of belonging for ourselves. Finally, we examine our current experiences of belonging and isolation as faculty in higher education as well as our efforts to create belonging in our classrooms. To conduct this exploration, we utilize value-creative inquiry, a dialogic approach in which we explore our narratives with the intention of creating value for ourselves and others. We met regularly over several months, both in person and through video conferencing, to share our stories and to document them. By exploring our stories dialogically, we sought to go beyond surfacing the influence of a socio-cultural phenomenon to consider what meaning we made from our challenging circumstances.

In our recent work, 21 we engaged in a dialogic inquiry discussing research methodologies that aligned with a relational paradigm. As we collaborated, we recognized that within our methodological approaches of dialogic inquiry 22 and narrative storytelling, 23 there were significant overlaps, and both were significant to the inquiry. Thus, we named our merged, collaborative approach value-creating inquiry and identified five criteria that made this approach unique: intent to create value, collaboration, connectedness of dialogue and narrative inquiry, transformation, and levels or dimensions of storytelling.

Value creation, a term introduced by Japanese educator Tsunesaburo Makiguchi 24 refers to the process of enriching our lives for personal and societal flourishing. Ikeda describes this process as “to find meaning, to enhance one’s own existence and to contribute to the well-being of others.” 25 As inquirers, we adopted Makiguchi and Ikeda’s intent to create value as a humanistic approach to research.

The first criteria, intent to create value, refers to the moment-to-moment compass that guides ongoing experience of researcher-participants in their process to find deeper meaning and significance. As we engage in inquiry or dialogue, we enter the space with the awareness and commitment to create value and meaning together. Collaboration reflects the negotiation and decision-making process of editing and revising what information to include and omit between researcher-participants. For this article, we conducted a self-study so it was only between the researchers using Google documents to negotiate the direction of the paper. However, when we conduct interviews with our participants, collaboration is also seen in the process of honoring our participants’ voices and inviting them to take part in the editing process to ensure accurate representation of their stories and perspectives.

Connectedness of dialogue and narrative inquiry highlights the contribution of both methods in the inquiry process, such as the importance of


challenging and probing in dialogue as well as the storytelling process in narrative inquiry. As we enter this space of inquiry, we take a dialogic approach to begin asking questions that stimulate a narrative response. Dialogue is then used to challenge and probe one another’s stories that are shared to guide us in a reflective space. This takes us to the next criteria.

Transformation is an outcome of the dialogic interaction between researcher-participants that demonstrates how new meaning or understanding is found from the transaction or engagement between researchers and participants. Each of our stories shared here are representations of what manifested through the dialogic transaction.

The last criterion, the level or dimensions of storytelling, is twofold. It recognizes the various voices that are weaving in and out of the inquiry as well as the various storytelling approaches that are shaped and shared in the inquiry. For example, there will be direct quotes in this paper from the researchers and a few student quotes selected from assignments to bring voices into storytelling. There will also be a narrative story representing the two researchers’ lived experiences and a collective voice narrating those stories.

Our Experiences of Alienation and Belonging

As we explored the intersection of belonging and school, we discovered a sense of alienation and fear of being judged, which created distance between us and our fellow students and teachers. However, we recognized that there were differences between various arenas of belonging: belonging to family, belonging to a school community (both with peers and with teachers), and belonging on a social level varied significantly. Each connected to a specific place, the particularities of which shaped our experiences of belonging. While we noted changes in belonging at different times in our lives, Julie and Melissa both found belonging within their families.

Julie, as a non-white student in large urban, public schools in New York and Los Angeles, always felt like an outsider, even though she was a US citizen. She grew up in a home where Japanese was the primary language; her parents were first generation Japanese immigrants. By being raised in a Japanese household, she felt a cultural dissonance in schools that made her feel like a foreigner.

I remember feeling culturally disconnected with the people and the classroom. As a result, I was often daydreaming in class. My fourth-grade teacher somehow assumed I could not speak or understand English well and assigned me to an ESL (now formally called ELL) classroom during certain periods. I remember desperately asking my mom to buy the perfect Snoopy cup for this fourth-grade teacher. I felt compelled to find a way to make her happy and to make her like me. When I think back to that moment, a feeling of anxiety wells up. It felt like my life depended on this one cup. Reflecting back to this moment, I realize now that I was longing for the basic human need for connection.

Julie’s experience reflects a lower sense of belonging and lack of ownership of the place she inhabited.26

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The physical structures at school also made it difficult for her to belong. The fences that were intended to protect students and keep outsiders from coming inside made her feel like she was trapped and caged. Most of her teachers seemed indifferent and did not make an effort to connect with her or help make her feel connected with others. She felt insignificant, a number in the classroom. She often reasoned to herself, “Well, teachers also have their own lives to think about. Why would they care about us?”

Culturally, I felt like I didn’t fit in, and my environment constantly reminded me of that. Fortunately, I felt safe and valued when I was home with my parents and siblings. In a world where I felt disconnected, my home was the only place where I felt like I truly belonged. While she was bothered about not being included, Julie did not even dream of being on top of the social hierarchy. The message she gleaned from her environment was, “I have to know my place.” Julie’s family situation, moving from New York to California, and her sense of disconnection and lack of care at school, reflect the lack of continuity of place.

Julie’s early childhood experiences led her to seek friends from the same racial backgrounds as she grew older. She reached out to Asian students because they were similar to her. She thought race and culture were a big part of what might help her feel like she belonged. She found herself moving between groups that were partially defined by her identity as an Asian-American, but she never quite found her home. She never knew for sure how many of her experiences had to do with her identity or were just part of the typical social challenges created by the age-segregated social structure of school.

On the other hand, circumstances changed for her after high school. At her small liberal arts college, Soka University of America (SUA), she felt noticed and valued. It was a place where the student and staff demographic were more diverse and included a large body of international students. Julie was surprised to feel a sense of belonging for the first time outside her family home. Even if she simply missed a class, it was noticed by others, leaving her with the feeling that she mattered.

My professors and classmates would reach out if they didn’t see me. There were high expectations for every student and I felt a sense of accountability and responsibility not only to myself but also to the campus community. Small but meaningful interactions empowered me to believe in my own potential. The school culture fostered a strong sense of agency and desire to contribute and be part of a larger community.

Julie’s SUA experience demonstrates the importance of Noddings’ continuity of place. It was her first time to be in one place (school) for more than 3 years. When she felt cared for and when a school was guided by an intent to foster agency, her past and present experiences guided her own intent to care for others. Julie’s personal childhood and college experience led her to pursue a career in education because she wanted to support future students. Knowing the importance of belonging, she wanted to foster connections the way she had experienced them in
college in order to empower other students’ ability to contribute to society.

Melissa never questioned whether she belonged in her small, K-8 Catholic school. Her parents and grandmothers both lived in the town where she grew up and regularly came to functions at the school. Though her family did not typically socialize with the rest of the families at her church, Melissa’s mother ran the Girl Scout troop, so she felt she was part of a community that stretched beyond the school day. Upon hearing Julie’s experience, Melissa explained,

I never felt like I was an unknown person or anonymous, even though I did notice that belonging was tied to my religious identity. It was clear to me that my town was divided by church affiliation. But within my small school, I knew just about every adult and child in the building and I suppose everyone knew me as well. I didn’t really appreciate the value of the belonging that surrounded me until hearing your [Julie’s] experience.

At the same time that Melissa had a sense of community belonging, she also felt like an outsider with her peers. Most of the girls in the class had large families with older siblings and lived in town. Melissa lived outside of town and was the oldest of three, so she did not have the benefit of being around older children she could learn from.

Three of the girls in my class lived a block from each other and were best friends. They had older siblings and they played sports together, knew what music was popular, and had fashionable haircuts. As a child living in the country without older siblings or cousins to learn from, I felt socially awkward and I was jealous of the three friends who were so close.

In Melissa’s story, continuity of place also played a significant role. She continued to attend her small but intimate school where she felt a sense of belonging. At the same time, she felt a lack of belonging in terms of community. Everybody mainly lived in town while Melissa lived outside of town, reinforcing the sense of alienation that stuck with Melissa. As she got older, Melissa felt stifled in her small town, and was happy to graduate high school and attend a university in a large metropolitan area.

Once she became a middle school science teacher, her school experiences lingered in her memories. While she did her best to create opportunities for her students to connect and feel a sense of belonging, she could not help but wonder if there might be a way to create a school environment that was more conducive to building community.

I didn’t like the distance that I perceived between myself and my students. Often, I felt that, as the all-knowing purveyor of content and as the enforcer of behavior rules, I was powerless to create authentic connections with or for my students. Further, no matter what I did in the classroom, I only saw my students for 40 minutes a day over the course of one school year. It didn’t seem like a very natural way of knowing and being with each other. I knew young people had many struggles with peer interactions, unhappy families, or academic pressures, and I was disappointed that school was not a community that could support them through those struggles.

After having her own children, Melissa came upon a book that described the Sudbury Valley School, a school of self-directed education that is run democratically by students and staff. She became fascinated with the idea that school did not have to employ coercion in order for students to have successful lives after graduation.

Once I read about self-directed education, I knew there was no way I could go back to teaching in a conventional school. I felt compelled to create a similar environment like The Sudbury Valley School where students could play and
pursue their interests with other community members of all ages, make decisions collaboratively to run the school, and feel a sense of ownership of the place where they spent their days. Even more, I craved an environment where I, as a staff member, would no longer be the “enemy” of students but would be an organic part of their community. The idea was exhilarating and freeing.

Melissa’s experience of wishing for more friendship and a community of children contributed to her desire to belong in adulthood and propelled her to create an alternative to conventional schooling. The school she founded, Tallgrass Sudbury School, is now in its fourteenth year. Transitioning into higher education, Melissa’s experiences of belonging and community inform her work and her classroom practice. Similarly, Julie’s childhood and college experience with belonging motivated her to pursue a career in education. Her own personal struggles and lived experiences guide her drive to foster belongingness in her own classrooms. The lens from which she builds her curriculum and teaching practices are informed by an ethic of care, teacher-student relationships, culturally relevant pedagogy and practice, student-centered practice, leadership development, and moral and character education.

Belonging in Higher Education

By examining our childhood experiences of belonging, we realized how much our desire to belong and our experiences of alienation were deep motivators for our desire to create a sense of belonging for our students and for ourselves in our roles as faculty at higher education institutions. Melissa, who teaches at an urban, predominantly white institution with a higher-than-average population of minority and first-generation college students, felt a strong need to effectively support belonging, which was all the more pressing during the aftermath of the murder of George Floyd. For Julie, who experienced firsthand the challenges of belonging as a minority student of color, creating a space for belonging was further informed by a desire to cultivate an inclusive, equitable, and ethical community. The sudden transition to online and hybrid learning modalities we encountered during the COVID-19 pandemic brought the need to create belonging in online modalities to the forefront.

Belonging and Online Learning

Online learning has become vital to meeting the needs of learners who would otherwise have limited access to education. Online platforms allow flexibility for individuals who have professional or personal commitments that challenge them to be present in face-to-face classroom instructions. Online learning has become crucial for educational institutions, especially those that are grappling with enrollment and economic challenges. Institutions have been slowly adopting this growing market. At the same time, there are concerns whether online learning is effective and provides the equivalent quality experience and outcome for learners.27 Higher education institutions, especially large institutions, have limitations that disrupt the continuity of place, especially as courses are term-specific and take place in various buildings and locations. However, an online space further disrupts continuity of place. With limited opportunities to feel belonging, student retention rates and student success can be low.

Thus, the social presence of others and the degree that the virtual connection feels “real” can help foster belonging in online classes. Learners who experienced more engagement and collaboration with their peers online feel a greater sense of belonging and fewer feelings of isolation, while the lack of such interaction may affect student retention. Instructor-learner and peer-to-peer interaction support student retention and student success. This points to the importance of structure and the instructors’ efforts to prepare a space and environment for peer engagement and learning—even in online settings. When the setting is structured to include activities, participants engage in deeper discussions. Other structural methods to improve presence and connection include using rich media technologies that provide a feeling of connection such as videos, audios, and synchronous meetings. Even the surface-level or off-topic conversations that develop in chat spaces foster social presence. Unfortunately, students in asynchronous settings report feeling more individualistic and feel less classroom-level belonging in comparison to those in synchronous online courses.

Fostering Belonging during Remote Learning

Julie’s full-time higher education teaching position was offered to her during the same academic year when COVID hit (2019-2020), while Melissa was finishing her second year of teaching educational leadership at her institution.

During the height of the pandemic, Melissa taught both synchronous and asynchronous online courses, while Julie taught asynchronous and Hy-Flex courses (in-person instruction while also offering synchronous instruction at the same time). For all members involved on campus, including faculty, staff, and students, the COVID pandemic was a challenging and emotionally-draining experience as people navigated both their personal and professional lives. Melissa recalls, Fortunately, I had received an initial training in online course delivery and had taught some online classes before the pandemic hit. In contrast, many of my colleagues had never taught an online class and had no training in using our online platform beyond turning the class on, emailing students, and posting a syllabus. I spent many hours supporting faculty in my department, both emotionally and with instructional support.

References


Lisa Thomas, James Herbert, and Marko Teras, “A Sense of Belonging to Enhance Participation, Success and Retention in Online Programs.”


Alberto Beuchot and Mark Bullen, “Interaction and Interpersonality in Online Discussion Forums,” Distance Education 26, no. 1 (2005), 67–87; Christine E. Wade et al., “Are Interpersonal Relationships Necessary for Developing Trust in Online Group Projects?,” Distance Education 32, no. 3 (2011), 383–96.

design assistance, as my colleagues navigated the transition to online teaching. The adjustment was a major stressor during an already difficult time.

Students were equally stressed out. Many students were experiencing anxiety and struggling with their mental health and depression. Accommodating and providing support was a priority shared in both Julie’s college and Melissa’s university. As Julie recounts,

“When we transitioned into a completely remote learning space, some of the common narratives that were echoed across the administration and faculty was to err on the side of compassion and empathy. There were students who had to support their families while keeping up with school. Some students experienced family deaths while trying to stay afloat in this unknown situation. Others felt isolated and alone. While some students adapted to the unknown and new learning environment, other students struggled to keep up due to various circumstances.

With the growing impact of COVID, Julie sensed a fear of connecting, but also a longing for connection at the same time as people created distance from one another. This led her to implement a number of strategies in her online and face-to-face, HyFlex environments.

In my unique classroom setup, which was an intersection of space and place, I focused on activities that encouraged interactions and discussions that would help build connection and relations with one another, especially across the in-person and online boundary.

Julie explains some of the strategies she applied to ensure undergraduate students felt belonging. The first was creating class norms. This was particularly important during the pandemic. Her class took time in small and large groups to discuss their individual expectations, values, and how they felt they should engage with one another in Zoom and remote settings, how they should act and behave with their masks, and how to handle food and drinks in the classroom. Instead of presenting the class with already formed policies or expectations, they took time to discuss and make decisions together as a new community in order to feel comfortable and accountable and to feel a sense of ownership of their space and place.

Next was requesting students to take ownership of making the class inclusive. To ensure that every voice was heard and not missed in the classroom, Julie asked in-person students to be a voice for the remote learners if they were raising their hand or making comments in the chat space. To create an inclusive space, in-person students were asked to bring their laptops to join Zoom during class. Audio was a challenge for the HyFlex classrooms because most classrooms were not yet equipped with microphones to collect all the voices in the classroom. Even if the students heard the instructor’s voice, most remote students could not hear the other students in the classroom speaking. This made learning difficult if the classroom structure was based on discussions. Thus, in-person students were asked to unmute to talk and put their cameras on for the online learners. Although small and frustrating, it was an important conscious and considerate act that they all committed to doing. To promote interactions between in-person and remote students, Julie also sometimes assigned small group discussions that had a mix of in-person and online learners. In short, to ensure that remote learners felt like they belonged and were a part of the class, Julie made sure to call on students who were joining remotely as much as she called on students in-person.

Next, incorporating culturally responsive pedagogy. In addition to fostering a space of critical thinking for students, Julie reflected critically on her own teaching and examined whether the learning environment was representative and inclusive in terms of content and message. Were the
materials and resources culturally diverse and representative? She reviewed the textbooks, activities, and resources she was utilizing to diversify the materials. Julie also created opportunities for peer learning and interactions using different applications to try to reach diverse learners.

Next, scheduling one-on-one meetings and group meetings. Midway through the semester, Julie incorporated a 15-minute, one-on-one meeting with all her students outside of class. This was an opportunity to personally connect with students, discuss their individual performances thus far, and provide an opportunity where students could voice their concerns or evaluation of the course. She also held weekly group meetings outside of class with the group assigned to present that week to help them prepare for the presentation.

Next, creating time for informal conversations. A short, five-minute activity was held at the beginning of class as a space to share concerns or tips with one another about how they were navigating through this challenging time. Sometimes Julie asked students to share an emoji or describe in one word how they were feeling. At other times the class created a list of uplifting or soothing songs that helped them get through the day. During a time of uncertainty, these activities were a way to shift the conversation to acknowledge that they were all going through this together before moving on to lectures or class work.

Finally, gratitude message. At the end of each semester in 2020, when students did their final presentation online, Julie asked students to share in open mic-style a short message of appreciation related to the class. She found that students enjoyed this meaningful closure and that most students wanted to share something. It was a way to feel united and connected.

These types of activities were instrumental in ensuring the student online felt more connected to classmates and the instructor. Unless instructors create a sense of belonging, students online may only see coursework as a collection of tasks to complete. In such a space, learners need to trust one another and feel connected to each other to create effective social spaces online. Thus, both Julie and Melissa found ways of using technology to build connections. For example, Melissa used Calendly, a scheduling application, to meet with each student for 15 minutes at the beginning of the quarter. Like Julie, she used VoiceThread—a collaborative platform with video, voice, and text commenting—to promote a less formal, more natural class discussion than can be achieved through written discussion boards. Although Melissa prefers seminar-style discussions to lectures in her face-to-face, graduate-level courses, she created video lectures so the students could feel more instructor presence. Furthermore, both Melissa and Julie found these additional strategies helpful for completely remote courses:

1. Multimedia: Since there are limitations to online modalities, utilizing multimedia technology applications to engage various learners was an important structure for students to feel connected and motivated. In addition to their respective institutions’ learning management systems, they incorporated applications such as VoiceThread and Padlet (a real-time collaborative web platform for uploading, organizing, and sharing content to virtual bulletin boards) to encourage creative engagement with course content.


2. **Instructor-student relationship:** In order for students to feel connected as much as possible, instructor engagement is the strategy most commonly mentioned by students as effective. Thus, Julie and Melissa responded promptly, provided timely feedback, and scheduled virtual appointments whenever necessary to increase their online presence with students.

3. **Team building:** Despite an asynchronous modality, Julie and Melissa ensured peer learning and interaction by creating teams to encourage connection and relationship. During this period, students were required to collaborate with or respond specifically to their assigned team members.

4. **Opening & Closure:** At the beginning and end of courses, discussion board threads and VoiceThreads were structured for building community by creating a space for students to introduce themselves during the opening week and to experience closure at the end of the course to share their appreciation and farewell to one another. For example, Melissa invited students to introduce themselves by describing a favorite childhood place and asked students to reflect on the affordances and constraints of the online experience via VoiceThread at the end of the quarter.

In various ways, both Julie and Melissa structured their learning environments, whether in the physical space or in the online space, for community building through strengthening associational life and incorporating small group interactions. Students in Julie’s courses shared how they were able to make friends in her class, which was an unusual experience for students during the pandemic when they had limited interaction or engagement with their peers.

Accordingly, one undergraduate student taking her HyFlex instruction shared:

> I want to express how this class has been very different from any other class I have been a part of . . . One thing I really liked was the learning environment because I was able to make new friends and collaborate and communicate with my classmates like I never really have before. This was unexpected since half the class was online. This was a really good way to make new connections and bring the class together like a community. I would highly recommend this class for others because it really helps you break out of your shell and learn about leadership with a hands-on approach.

Similarly, students taking her asynchronous course shared:

> I enjoyed the team interaction and I believe it brought the comments and conversation into a more authentic and richer space. The comments by my team members were encouraging and guiding. Sometimes I would watch their VoiceThreads and then wanted to add even more to mine! The team orientation had a significant impact in a good way. I was very happy to establish a better connection with a smaller group of people. I looked forward to our interactions and I do feel that we were able to develop a great rapport with each other.

The statements by the students in both the HyFlex and asynchronous courses demonstrate that it is possible to foster connection and belonging in online courses and, further, how that experience motivates students to continue being engaged in their learning environment. Still, it should be noted that, while the strategies we mention were successful for many cases, at the same time, there were also challenges. Due to an ambiguous attendance policy, students in Julie’s HyFlex classes missed more class sessions in comparison to pre-COVID. There were also a few students who showed dissatisfaction toward peer interaction and preferred individualized,
self-paced courses. Although expectations for the peer engagement and learning were noted in the syllabus and also during the first day of the semester, there are always one or two students who express disapproval of peer assignments. Be that as it may, both Julie and Melissa discovered engagement strategies that they will carry forward with them in future classes post-pandemic.

Seeking Belonging during Remote Teaching

Turning from student belonging to faculty belonging, it should be noted that it is not uncommon for faculty members to experience a lack of belonging in higher education. As Block describes, a paradigm that perpetuates scarcity, individualism, and competition undermines belonging and community.\textsuperscript{38}

The corporatization of higher education, the pressures of competition and the siloed organizational structures work against the creation of trusting relationships. As non-tenure-track faculty, Melissa and Julie inhabit a “separate but not quite equal” space due to their ambiguous status.\textsuperscript{39} Onboarding procedures were especially lacking in helping Melissa feel like she belonged. When she first worked for her institution as a graduate assistant, no one even spoke to Melissa as she sat alone in her office for her first few months. Now, as a faculty member, she finds that faculty are so busy that they seldom have time to work together as collaborators. Julie experienced similar experiences due to the timing of her hiring. She was hired during the academic year when the pandemic hit, which resulted in a year-long work isolation. It was difficult for Julie to feel connected to her colleagues since she was just beginning to get to know them.

Surprisingly, Melissa’s experience changed during the pandemic. Her college of education community, reeling after George Floyd’s murder and compelled by the subsequent protests, immediately searched for a meaningful response. A grassroots effort between faculty and staff members led to a number of initiatives, including anti-racism study and support groups. As part of this effort, Melissa found herself in Zoom meetings with a non-hierarchical mix of department assistants and other staff members, students, and tenured faculty from other departments. Many of these colleagues were people she did not really know prior to these online gatherings. Sometimes they discussed books like \textit{My Grandmother’s Hands}\textsuperscript{40} or movies like the James Baldwin documentary, \textit{I Am Not Your Negro}. At other times, the groups discussed how to facilitate anti-racism work at combined faculty and staff meetings or with students.

As she explained,

> Although I had received my doctorate from this institution and had subsequently taught there for two years at the time COVID-19 hit, the move to online meetings meant I was getting to know people other than my immediate coworkers for the first time. In addition, I was able to get to know them on a different level, one in which it was safe to be vulnerable. For the first time, I truly felt like I belonged to the college.

Still, Melissa and her colleagues grappled with the challenges of reshaping an institution organized hierarchically and fraught, at times, with power dynamics and a scarcity mindset. Interestingly, long-time faculty members told Melissa

\textsuperscript{38} Block, \textit{Community}.


\textsuperscript{40} Resmaa Menakem, \textit{My Grandmother’s Hands: Racialized Trauma and the Pathway to Mending Our Hearts and Bodies} (Las Vegas, NV: Central Recovery Press, 2017).
that their new building has contributed to the lack of community. In the old building, because offices were located across the hall from one another, faculty members were more likely to see each other, to chat, and to keep their doors open. In the new building, while faculty have their own classrooms, offices are spread out and there is no good congregating area.

This observation lends credence to the idea that a place can shape belonging. Nevertheless, during the pandemic, discussions of a shared vision for their institution, such as how to build a healthier culture and how to resist neoliberal pressures, has created community. Furthermore, faculty and staff are using the lens of anti-racism to ask, “How do we create more relational and less hierarchical ways of knowing, being, and doing?” At her institution, Julie connected with the Center for Advancement of Faculty Excellence and attended various virtual events designed to support faculty instruction and professional development. These periodic events provided opportunities for faculty to connect during the pandemic.

Building Caring Communities

The pandemic brought immeasurable challenges to educators across the globe.

Many of us were challenged to do something that we had never done before. Although we navigated uncharted territories, we drew on our resilience because of our desire to do the best for our students. Whether it was fully online or blended or HyFlex mode, we had to challenge ourselves in new ways to compensate for the lack of continuity of place, pushing against the highly abstract nature of digital spaces. By necessity, we learned how to use new tools and methods. While it is uncertain what the long-term impact of the pandemic will be relative to online course proliferation, evidence suggests that prioritizing belonging can contribute to student and faculty well-being whether we congregate in a physical place or only connect via a virtual space. Therefore, we utilize Block’s five principles for building community as a framework to discuss our experiences and consider what lessons will stay with us after the pandemic subsides.

Block suggests five principles to guide a strategy to build community. The first principle is to build a social fabric of care for, and accountability to, each other. Block argues that when we have caring relationships, we also feel accountable to one another and develop a community. Informed by her own lack of belonging during her schooling experiences, Julie had a strong desire to create caring relationships. Thus, she structured her course in a way for students to develop caring relationships with their instructor and peers. This allowed for students to feel a connection and a sense of community. Melissa sought caring relationships among faculty and staff at her institution and found her sense of community strengthening through the social fabric built around anti-racism work.

The second principle is to build a strong associational life through a shared purpose. Both incidental and planned meetings are opportunities for community building and social transformation. Julie and Melissa attempted to provide opportunities for associational life by creating structured assignments (group projects and discussions) and having meetings for learners to engage and foster organic connections with one another—while acknowledge that a higher education course is not always conducive to associating for a shared purpose. In contrast, both Melissa and Julie experienced associational life in earlier school experiences. Julie found relatedness in her college experience, and Melissa found it in the school she started. In addition, Melissa found the shared purpose of anti-racism to be a

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Block, Community.
springboard for associational life at her institution.

The third principle for community-building strategies is the use of power to convene others to create an alternative future. Block argues that action is organic and emergent when driven by a shift in thinking and actions of individuals, not by organizations or leaders; thus, grassroots efforts build community. In both our cases, we did not necessarily wait for the institution to guide us in instructional methods for online instruction. Informed by our desire, we took it upon ourselves to foster spaces of belonging. Sometimes this meant taking initiative such as using tools the institution was not providing—for example, scheduling additional synchronous gatherings or adopting Zoom over Blackboard for virtual meetings because the Gallery feature better fostered community. Nevertheless, in a classroom, most gatherings are not organic and emergent, and even less so in the online environment, so this feature is difficult to cultivate as teachers. Melissa found parallels, however, at the organizational level of her university, where the anti-racism work was driven by faculty and staff rather than the administration of the college.

The fourth principle is the structure of small groups, the unit of size where transformation occurs. Small groups are where relationships are formed and change can take place. Block encourages us to let go of the idea of “scaling up” and instead argues that groups should be kept small to retain the power of citizens. Similarly, Ikeda advocates for a life-sized paradigm of change, one that “never deviates from the human scale.” According to Ikeda, a life-sized paradigm can combat the sense of powerlessness people feel in the face of systemic oppression. In our classes, we structured various small group activities that ranged from mini activities to group projects. We believe students felt a stronger sense of autonomy as a result. Further, as reflected in the student testimonials, engaging in small groups resulted in positive outcomes, including fostering friendships and engaging in deeper dialogue. At the institutional level, Melissa found her sense that she could make a difference in her institution to be greatly improved when she began engaging in small, online meetings with her colleagues.

The fifth principle for building community is changing the conversation in service of transformation. Although not discussed above, Julie and Melissa, as any good teacher might, included course content that helped students name problems and reframe conversations. In both classroom discussions and one-on-one meetings, we drew on course content to reframe or change the conversation with our students. Through dialogue on course content, students had the opportunity to reframe (e.g., from fear to hope), giving them a transformative context from which to build social capital. In a similar fashion, Melissa found that the anti-racism discussions taking place in her college of education empowered faculty, staff, and students alike to move toward transformation.

Through the lens of Block’s five principles for strategic community-building, our experiences of belonging and efforts to create community highlight the limitations of higher education classrooms. In face-to-face and online classes, we can practice community building strategies, but classrooms are not places where students freely organize and initiate grassroots efforts toward transformation. Thus, the level of belonging in relatively abstract spaces differs from a community that comes together organically in a specific place with the goal of transformation. On the other hand, our experiences outside the classroom, whether it be on a college campus, in a school of self-directed education, or as

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colleagues in higher education, suggest that such strategies hold potential for initiating transformative change through belonging.

**Conclusion**

COVID brought into sharp relief the importance of community, belonging, and care. While electronic technology can be a convenience that isolates and disconnects us, it has also helped us maintain or stay connected during this time of adversity. In our challenge to create a place of belonging for our students, some emerging questions linger.

Informed and driven by our personal schooling experiences, we worked to create a space of belonging, even when we did not have a physical place to gather. However, an ongoing question for us is whether the online space can really replace the in-person experience, or whether the in-person place is necessary for a full sense of belonging and community. It seems unlikely that a child’s online interactions can produce the same kinds of physical and social-emotional benefits of in-person play identified by play researchers, such as self-regulation, perspective taking, making friends, and negotiation. 43 If a face-to-face experience is a necessary human experience, to what degree can belonging be created in online spaces? This is a complex question that must be situated and considered contextually. Thus, in this article and discussion, we direct this question specifically to the higher education context. In the higher education context, we will most likely continue to be challenged with the reality that learners can more easily distance themselves when engaging virtually, instructors will be at different levels of commitment in terms of the delivery and structure of their instruction, and, with the changing times, institutions will continue to expand with remote digital learning. It will take both instructors and learners to create a space of belonging, but a prerequisite is that instructors provide an inclusive space of community and belonging.

Moving forward, we call attention to the implications of Donald’s distinction between place and space and Noddings’ notion of continuity of place. Since an online space calls for a high level of abstraction and lacks continuity of place, it creates additional challenges for students to feel a sense of belonging. However, Dewey’s notion of continuity, which argues that curriculum should be connected to the student’s personal experiences, their pasts and their futures, provides an opening for creating a sense of continuity and connection for students. Making course content and assignments relevant to students can naturally increase student academic belonging.

While we followed the third principle of using power to take initiative and create places for belonging and positive change in our own spaces, an ongoing question is how to change the larger institution. As Nunn 44 states, students have different levels of belonging that affect their well-being and desire to stay or leave the institution. Our efforts in the classroom may be one where we can affect their academic belonging. But we must also consider the social and community campus aspects of belonging. What else is needed so that students feel belonging in all aspects of their college life?

As Block argues, when we feel belonging, we also develop care and accountability for our community. It is time for the basic human desire to belong, to be connected, to be a part of some place, to become a top priority for contemporary institutions.

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44 Nunn, *College Belonging.*