

## EDUCATION THROUGH EXPERIENCE IN AND BEYOND THE PANDEMICS

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“The pebbles of knowledge must be bonded together by the cement of experience.”

-R.G. LeTourneau

In the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic, R.G. LeTourneau’s aphorism helps me to reframe what’s happening in the world and to see current events from a range of different perspectives—even ones that challenge my own. Although I have not been in school for the past six months due to COVID-19, I feel like I have learned more about the world and about myself than I had learned in the entire school year(s) prior. It’s not that I didn’t learn a lot the years before, I did. It’s that I believe the most important and profound lessons an individual must learn are those that cannot be learned in the classroom, they are the ones that are learned through lived experiences. The lessons that change and transform our lives can only be learned by reflecting on our most impactful and challenging experiences. It is the challenges and struggles we face that force us to learn and grow the most. In my opinion, the period of time that we are currently enduring is one of those transformational learning experiences.

When the School District of Philadelphia closed down due to COVID-19 in early March 2020, after a brief break of a couple of weeks, we proceeded with the school year by shifting to online classes. Since my school, Science Leadership Academy, had already engaged in online learning while our building was shut down for asbestos issues for weeks in the fall last academic year, the teachers were experienced and well-versed in how to teach online and the students were ready to learn online as well. We were able to begin the online classes right away, which made it less stressful since we knew we would finish the year out which we were worried about at the time. However, while school was happening, I felt that these online classes were more for the teachers to connect with and help students who were struggling to improve their grades, but they did not do much to challenge students who were already thriving in our classes. This was incredibly frustrating for me, but I continued to do the work assigned to the best of my ability and with diligence even though my grades had no room for improvement. But I felt underwhelmed and needed to go elsewhere for learning and growth.

The events of May 25th changed everything. The murder of George Floyd and all that ensued in its wake made me really reflect and hit my own reset button. After pondering the serious crises our society was facing, especially the crisis of systemic racism and police violence against Black Americans, I came to the profound realization that these circumstances are an incredible opportunity for my learning and development, for my generation’s learning and development, and for the development of actual solutions for these problems. Upon this realization, I began to see things in a new and different light, I began to more keenly and critically observe the nature of the turmoil that is shaking the world infrastructure, I began working to develop my own ideas about why society was acting and reacting how it was, and what the future implications and address of these reactions may be. In doing so, I not only felt as though I was making up for the learning I lost due to COVID-19, but I truly felt like I was learning more about society and how to change it--how messed up things really are and how my generation is going to need to come together to step up to fix it-- than I had been learning in school.

Learning in these new and transformative ways taught me about a growth mindset, about showing up in my own learning, and about being accountable to and for my own growth and development each day. Although our experience with COVID-19 is far from ideal, it is really a valuable learning experience that we must take up not just to better ourselves, but to better our communities and to improve the conditions of our society as a whole. While school provides us with the knowledge and other means to develop ourselves, it is up to each of us, I now see, to understand how to leverage and build on that knowledge through and in our experiences, reflecting metacognitively on what is happening politically, economically, educationally, and inside of myself in order to cement the pebbles of knowledge that it is all too easy to lose sight of or miss, especially in these times of elongated crisis and constant change.

Every day of our lives provides countless experiences that we have the ability to learn and grow from, no matter how small or seemingly insignificant each of these individual experiences may seem. It is of the utmost importance, especially for us as the younger generation of this country, that we learn to take full advantage of the opportunities that *all of our* experiences—including these pandemics—present us with as often as we can, including opportunities to fight against racial inequality and oppression. In doing so, not only can we develop ourselves as individuals, but we can use our collective growth and influence to create changes that are critical for the betterment of society. Given that the world is currently reeling out of control, it is crucial that we cultivate new resources for what is to come, and that we come together to do it. It is my hope that others have come to similar realizations as I have so that we can begin working to make these changes today. This is just the beginning.

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