

**May 25, 2022**

Dear *Perspectives on Urban Education* Readers,

This *Perspectives on Urban Education* End-of-Year Youth Voices Edition marks over two years since the COVID-19 pandemic sent the world inside with quarantine, social distancing, and shelter-in-place orders. Educators still feel the impact of the pandemic acutely as they continue to face changing realities that affect schooling. Students still feel the impact of the pandemic profoundly as they continue to endure these implications of these realities for their lives, often without useful guidance.

In these times it is vital to acknowledge that we are not in what many refer to as a ‘new normal’ and that there’s no ‘new normal’ coming—there is only constant change, now and in the future. We need healing frames that help us make sense of our new reality and its implications for ourselves, our students, for teaching and schooling. Seeking the kind of ‘normalcy’ that resembles the discriminatory and inequitable system we entered the pandemic with makes no logical sense. This moment provides a unique opportunity to disrupt and reinvent schooling, teaching, leading, and the field of education, to eschew the transactional and socially reproductive and embrace the transformational and socially disruptive. To do so, we must foreground, listen to, and take action upon the voices, experiences, and wisdom of our youth. This Special Edition seeks to “story the gaps in education” (Ravitch & Kannan, 2022) through foregrounding youth stories.

In a Freirean conceptualization of critical literacy, real-life struggles are texts to read and decode in the process of learning. In doing so, we build new literacies that interrupt and supplant hegemonic ones, that help build culturally responsive and affirming schooling (Freire, 1970). The pandemic offers wide-ranging opportunities for youth (and the adults who guide them) to co-construct critical literacies—new opportunities to read, re-write, and enact education as a project of freedom-building that rejects oppressive structural constraints sedimented into the education system long before coronavirus. We must examine how the pandemic exacerbates foundational inequalities for youth and communities precisely along the bias lines of race and social class.

We can learn a great deal if we read the present as a living text that offers opportunities to foreground, hybridize, and engage a range of youth experiences and voices. This is a necessary interruption to a mythological, hegemonic center that reproduces White dominance and pushes so-called ‘others’ values, logics, resources, knowledges, and needs to the socially constructed margins (hooks, 1994). To create emergent literacies *with* youth, we must rebuild education differently. We can only accomplish this when we work with youth on the foundational project of school equity.

As an educational researcher and someone who designs and facilitates equity-focused professional development for teachers, school leaders, and school counselors, I've learned a great deal by engaging and building supportive pedagogical practices with educational leaders, counselors and social workers. I've iterated the flux pedagogy framework in light of their feedback, meetings with teachers and school leaders, and professional development sessions with higher education leaders. I seek to use my privilege and positionality to cultivate an actionable framework for educators as a scaffold and affirmation in this elongated moment of flux.

Radical compassion, self-care, and love are integrated as key dimensions of trauma-informed and healing-centered pedagogy given that educators are in distress, which is not good for them as people nor sustainable as educational leaders. The pandemic lands in people's lives in relation to pre-existing identity-based privileges and oppressions. As educators, we must take intentional care of ourselves for many reasons so that we have the energy and focus needed to see and support our students, families, and each other. To do this, we must speak to how social identities, in terms of their proximity to structural power, shape our students (and our own) experiences of the pandemic. The ability to conceptualize and articulate the structural and systemic in terms of how systems of domination show up and shape experience at individual, group, community, and national levels is vital for educational equity. The ability to engage in assets-based conversations and healing processes in relation to trauma caused by the system is the heart of educational equity, individual healing, social transformation, and education as a practice of freedom (Ginwright, 2018; hooks, 1994).

Watching the U.S. government mishandle this pandemic and intentionally place already marginalized, minoritized, and vulnerable populations at even greater risk make the cruel systemic abuses of our nation and its education system even more undeniably clear. The hyper-individualism, inequity, greed, and transactionalism of our education system—its systematic marginalization and dehumanization of Black, Brown, Asian, and Indigenous students and communities—must be countered in transformational ways that this time demands. To do so, we foreground youth voices and centralize their experiences across the pandemic. As youth editors Lev Burstein and Liyam Yaghoobzadeh illuminate, educators and educational researchers must partner with youth, learn from and with youth as we move education forward. The pandemic has shown us that youth have a great deal to share with us and to teach us; it is our ethical and pedagogical responsibility to learn to see and listen to youth and their stories anew. Their lives, and our collective future, depend on it.

In *The Pandemic is a Portal*, luminary Arundhati Roy (2020) contextualizes the COVID-19 pandemic within the long history of global pandemics that have radically altered the world. On this timeline of the human race, Roy places this pandemic as a timely and necessary portal—an opening that we can, and must, make for global political, economic, social, and spiritual change. Roy inspires us to strategically and reflexively unlearn and remake forward,

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.

For those of us, and there are many, ready to fight for structural equity in our education system, this moment of radical flux is a clarion call for a paradigm change to an enacted interdependence, ethical collectivism, and critical inclusivity in education. We must build back within and for a new paradigm, with new tools (Lorde, 1988) that help us to identify, converge, and amplify our collective power as we shake the knowledge tree of education down to its socially reproductive and deficit-oriented roots. Our youth can guide us there, we must share power so they can light our way.

In critical hope and love,

Sharon M. Ravitch, Ph.D., Faculty Advisor, *Perspectives on Urban Education*

## References

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