

## **What We Choose to Remember: Imagined Shared Narratives of Education During COVID-19**

Kimberly Kappler Hewitt

Heidi Carlone

Beverly S. Faircloth

Laura M. Gonzalez

Ye He

Amy Vetter

*University of North Carolina at Greensboro, USA*

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### **ABSTRACT**

*The impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on educational policies and practices are unprecedented. Our pre-COVID-19 lives in education were defined by boundaries that shaped taken-for-granted meanings about what counts as education, whose responsibility it was to educate, and what it meant to lead, teach, and learn. In this essay, we imagined education in 2030, through the lens of our COVID-19 experience and asked: What will we choose to remember and what generative impact do we want to take pride in claiming?*

**Keywords:** Covid-19, education equity, social justice, boundary crossing

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**T**he impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on educational policies and practices are unprecedented. With the majority of educational institutions

forced to limit face-to-face interactions, teaching and learning have rapidly taken on vastly new meanings. Even in the midst of the uncertainties of this pandemic, predictions for the post COVID-19 world have begun to emerge (e.g., Karlgaard, 2020; Kim, 2020). Yet as we move forward, we collectively create the past. That is, historical implications are never objective descriptions of what occurred, but rather collective decisions about how we choose to remember the past (Anderson, 1991; Breuilly, 2016). In this spirit, we ask: *As educators imagining education in 2030, through the lens of our COVID-19 experience, what will we choose to remember and what generative impact do we want to take pride in claiming?*

Our pre-COVID-19 lives in education were defined by boundaries that shaped taken-for-granted meanings about what counted as education, whose responsibility it was to educate, and what it meant to lead, teach, and learn. Though each one of us has tried to disrupt these boundaries in our own work, we continually found ourselves butting up against sociopolitical and historical structures that made the status quo – and inequitable educational opportunities and outcomes – more likely. Our efforts to recognize and address implicit bias, de-track, and replace rigid discipline systems with restorative justice, among other things, have therefore repeatedly fallen short of our vision.

The COVID-19 crisis has magnified the inequities that have plagued our educational system for years: opportunity gaps, digital divides, persistent tracking, and the effects of discrimination, racism, xenophobia, and classism, among other forms of oppression. Layers of traditional practices and roles woven into the historical tapestry of school cultures are rapidly unraveling amidst this pandemic. With that unraveling comes the opportunity to rethink, reimagine, and disrupt boundaries that perpetuate oppression and inequity. For example, Mr. B, a sixth-grade teacher in Fort Worth, TX, disrupted the new norm of distance learning by delivering math instruction to an autistic student, who was struggling with online learning, in his driveway, using a whiteboard and maintaining social distancing (Reece, 2020). While this is an example of a teacher disrupting boundaries that perpetuate oppression and inequity, we recognize that this kind of "teaching during a crisis" is not sustainable, and more systemic changes need to be made.

Rather than narrowly defining goals of education in terms of skills, proficiencies, benchmarks, test scores, or grades, we could shift to include goals such as democratic or civic engagement, connection and community, and lessons tied to problem solving in real time given the urgency of current events. For example, students at schools and colleges across various states

have designed and used 3D printers to produce protective masks for healthcare workers (Byrne, 2020; Francies, 2020; West, 2020).

Human development encompasses not only increased cognitive complexity, but increased empathy, as we acknowledge and respect the strengths and challenges of those around us, and increased generosity of spirit and action, as we take the health and wellbeing of others to matter as much as our own. Aligned with this perspective, countless teachers have been checking in on students by phone, Zoom, and other creative ways. For example, first grade teacher LaRinda Neal made arrangements with her students' parents and drove by their homes, waving an encouraging sign and shouting to each student that they are missed and loved (personal communication, May 5, 2020). In addition, in North Carolina (USA), local non-profits partnered with a large urban district to give families 10,000 refurbished laptops so that every student has the technology needed to learn at home (Pounds, 2020). That same district served over 1 million meals across more than 100 school and neighborhood sites within the first seven weeks of the pandemic (WXIII2 Web Staff, 2000). It is important, though, to recognize that this is not enough. Despite receiving free devices, there are some families who are unable to utilize those resources, especially those in rural areas like our mountain communities in North Carolina. Instead, we hope that these exemplars serve as a call to action for us all.

Considering these examples, can we finally balance what we do on a daily basis in the service of learning with our highest ethical standards? The goals of equity are enduring; their (im)possibility, however, has been demonstrated in study after study in which the status quo is so easily reproduced. In the COVID-19 world, with the urgency of needs brought into sharper relief, we see cracks in the system that has so handily perpetuated injustice and maintained artificial boundaries between stakeholders' roles, content areas, families, communities and schools. We may never have labeled the disruption we believe we need in education as a "seismic shift" the size of COVID-19, as we do not often invite change that feels like it should be measured on a Richter scale. However, that is the scale of change we need, and this may be our moment.

Post COVID-19, as educators perhaps we can take pride in our regained focus on communities' well-being as a central goal of education beyond cognitive outcomes; our renewed appreciation of and strategies for cultivating our own and our students' assets; and our reinvigorated efforts to promote social justice in education so that the inequities we have witnessed will no longer be the status quo. In years to come, when we look back, may we choose to remember and preserve the powerful boundary crossings that

have rescued and re-formed education in a pandemic. Let us not have lost the "pockets of greatness" (Collins, 2001) we have witnessed; let us spread them.

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**Kimberly Kappler Hewitt**, PhD, is an Associate Professor of Educational Leadership in the School of Education, University of North Carolina at Greensboro. Her major research interests include school leadership preparation, instructional leadership, research-practice partnerships, and sustaining change in schools. Email: [kkhewitt@uncg.edu](mailto:kkhewitt@uncg.edu)

**Heidi Carlone**, PhD, is the Hooks Distinguished Professor of STEM Education at the University of North Carolina, Greensboro. She studies equity in science, engineering, and environmental education, with emphasis on the culture of learning settings, youths' identity work in those settings, and supporting teachers as learners and leaders. Email: [hbcarlon@uncg.edu](mailto:hbcarlon@uncg.edu)

**Beverly S. Faircloth**, Ph.D., is an Associate Professor of Educational Psychology in the School of Education at the University of North Carolina at Greensboro. Her research focuses on student sense of belonging, especially resisting barriers to belonging among marginalized groups. Email: [bsfaircl@uncg.edu](mailto:bsfaircl@uncg.edu)

**Laura M. Gonzalez**, PhD, is an Associate Professor of Higher Education in the School of Education at the University of North Carolina at Greensboro. Her research revolves around supports and barriers to college access for students from Latinx immigrant families. Email: [lmgonza2@uncg.edu](mailto:lmgonza2@uncg.edu).

**Ye He**, PhD, is a Professor in the School of Education, University of North Carolina at Greensboro. Her research focuses on the promotion of strength-based, community-engaged, and diverse language and culture centered teaching and learning practices. Email: [y\\_he@uncg.edu](mailto:y_he@uncg.edu)

**Amy Vetter**, PhD is a Professor of English Education in the School of Education, University of North Carolina at Greensboro. Her areas of research are literacy and identity, critical conversations, and the writing lives of teens. Email: [amvetter@uncg.edu](mailto:amvetter@uncg.edu)

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