

COVID-19 AND EDUCATIONAL INEQUITIES: THE LONG VIEW

“Whatever it is, coronavirus has made the mighty kneel and brought the world to a halt like nothing else could...and in the midst of this terrible despair, it offers us a chance to rethink the doomsday machine we have built for ourselves. Nothing could be worse than a return to normality...”

-- Arundhati Roy
Financial Times, April 3, 2020

Introduction

As the COVID-19 pandemic continues to spread across the U.S. and around the world, school systems everywhere are in crisis management mode, hoping to reopen safely while simultaneously making valiant efforts at continuity of instruction via remote technologies and, where possible, “hybrid” models that blend in-person and virtual teaching.¹ The pandemic has exposed deep problems in the content, structure, financing, and governance of schools: although known to education and other social science researchers for decades, the scourge of inequality has now become apparent to a wider public. Indeed, the coronavirus crisis coincides with what many describe as three additional pandemics – America’s reawakening to realities of racial injustice and violent extremism, an economic recession that shows no signs of significant recovery in the near term, and a climate crisis as experienced by victims of California wildfires and record-breaking Gulf Coast hurricanes.

An abridged version of the powerful words of Arundhati Roy (Man Booker Prize winner) would be to ask ourselves to imagine returning to something better than this unacceptable status quo.² In the education context, can we visualize – and work toward – a *structural reset* of American education, in which historical inequality and the “deficit” model of teaching and learning are supplanted with an array of programs and processes to maximize opportunity for and potential of all students? For the most vulnerable students – those with special needs, English learners, members of historically marginalized groups, and indeed all students disconnected from their existing support systems by the pandemic, the reset is most urgent: returning to “normal” for them would mean tolerance of low proficiency levels in literacy and math, high rates of suspension and expulsion, over-identification (and misclassification) of students for special education, and low rates of high school completion. In this light, to reimagine what *could* be – and to not resign ourselves to what *has been* – can be an inspiration to refocus efforts of the policy, educator, and research communities on principles of equity, fairness, and expansion of opportunity.

And as so aptly stated by Governor Bob Wise, now, with a “multigenerational COVID class,” we may have the public will needed for “a reset in education.” Since February 2020, 50 million k-12 students and 20 million higher education students have been pulled from their physical classrooms and many of them have not returned or not fully returned. Ninety to one-hundred million adults were suddenly turned into homebound teachers and caregivers. Three and a half million k-12 teachers and 1.7 million postsecondary faculty and instructors as well as another 2 to 3 million administrative and non-academic support personnel were forced to engage with students and their work in a completely different manner. In October 2020, 26 million persons were claiming some form of unemployment benefits (the highest numbers since record keeping began in 1948), and these persons were placed in the position of not only having to assist in the homebound education of their children but to also seek personal educational opportunities to position themselves for new employment. This multigenerational COVID class impacted by educational upheaval is inclusive of half of the U.S. population and spans all racial, economic and political groups. And while it is clear that, for instance, those across the economic continuum experienced and continue to experience this crisis differently, they all share commonalities, including a better understanding and appreciation for the physical roles of schools, the vital roles of teachers, and the necessity of technology. While recognizing that this multigenerational COVID class spanning half the U.S. population does not share a common view of the future, the shared experiences of this COVID class around COVID’s implications for education can be the impetus for long-term change.³

The Long View

To explore this proposition for “the long view,” while at the same time acknowledging and respecting the immediate needs of educators and children and their families to recover from the disruption of the pandemics, the National Academy of Education (NAEd) convened a public forum with expert panelists. Building off prior work addressing COVID-19 and inequities in the specific areas of mathematics, reading, and social-emotional learning, the NAEd engaged with three scholars and a distinguished policy expert, whose work has centered on understanding – and reducing – fundamental barriers in fulfilling the American vision of equitable education: Deborah Loewenberg Ball (University of Michigan), Gloria Ladson-Billings (University of Wisconsin-Madison), Louis Gomez (University of California, Los Angeles), and former Governor of West Virginia Bob Wise (Global Science of Learning Education Network).

In a discussion moderated by Michael Feuer (The George Washington University), the panelists were asked to address a framing question: *What strategies do you believe are best bets to advance us in the direction of a meaningful reset to our nation’s educational system?* From their remarks, and from comments and questions of participants in the forum, a set of “takeaway” messages emerged, which are summarized below.

Best Hopes for a Reset in American Education

Best Hopes	Strategic Principles
<p>Teaching and learning require a student-centered, problem-centered approach.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Problem solving and real world problems must be at the center of learning. Students and teachers should be enabled to address issues confronting all children and communities in the learning process. • The learning process must be redefined to reflect the lived experiences of students beyond school, apply interdisciplinary knowledge, and construct a domain for understanding and investigating real-world issues.
<p>Students, parents, caregivers, community partners, and educators need to be active participants in the development of content and reform of school structures.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Learning environments need to be inclusive of all stakeholders (i.e., students, parents, caregivers, community partners, educators); listening across communities is needed for successful education. • Learning environments need to encompass not only schools, but learning and experiences that occur in communities and homes. • Schools should become the social and intellectual hub where students can bring their voices to be part of the planning and execution of their learning. • Educators must be able to empathize with people and understand their situations and lived experiences, which means more than just imagining how they would react in those situations.
<p>Teacher preparation must encourage culturally responsive problem-centered instruction.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Teachers, to provide problem-centered instruction, will need to be trained to ground their teaching in the environments in which students live. • Expectations of teaching must also include helping students become genuine problem-solvers.
<p>A whole-child equity approach requires equitable access to infrastructure and funding.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Federal funding must guarantee, at a minimum, equitable access to computer and related devices, broadband connectivity, and services. • A stimulus package is necessary – but insufficient – to help sustain families and communities impacted by the pandemic. There is also an urgent need for federal funding for systemic, equitable change. • The federal government should explore the funding of a flexible career workforce training account for each student that provides continued learning opportunities beyond k-12.

Panelists

COVID-19 and Educational Inequities Forum Series
Institutional Changes: The Long View
Tuesday, October 13, 2020

Deborah Loewenberg Ball

Arthur F. Thurnau Professor
William H. Payne Collegiate Professor of
Education
University of Michigan

Gloria Ladson-Billings

Professor Emerita, Department of Curriculum &
Instruction
University of Wisconsin-Madison
President
National Academy of Education

Louis Gomez

Professor of Education
University of California, Los Angeles

Governor Bob Wise

Former Governor of West Virginia
Education Consultant and Coordinator
*Global Science of Learning Education
Network*

Michael Feuer (Moderator)

Dean and Professor, Graduate School of
Education and Human Development
The George Washington University
Immediate Past President
National Academy of Education

Steering Committee Members

Michael Feuer (Chair)

Dean and Professor, Graduate School of
Education and Human Development
The George Washington University

Hyman Bass

Samuel Eilenberg Distinguished University
Professor of Mathematics & Mathematics
Education
University of Michigan

Dorothy Espelage

William C. Friday Distinguished Professor of
Education
University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill

Gloria Ladson-Billings

Professor Emerita, Department of
Curriculum & Instruction
University of Wisconsin-Madison

Susanna Loeb

Director, Annenberg Institute at Brown
University
Professor of Education and International and
Public Affairs
Brown University

Annemarie Sullivan Palincsar

Chair of Educational Studies
Jean and Charles R. Walgreen Jr. Professor of
Reading and Literacy
Arthur F. Thurnau Professor
University of Michigan

William F. Tate IV

Provost and Executive Vice President of
Academic Affairs
Distinguished Professor of Sociology and
Family and Preventive Medicine
University of South Carolina

Frank Worrell

Professor and Director, School Psychology
Faculty Director, Academic Talent
Development Program
Faculty Director, California College
Preparatory Academy
Affiliate Professor, Psychology
University of California, Berkeley

Stanton Wortham

Inaugural Charles F. Donovan, S.J., Dean
Boston College

Endnotes

¹ Lieberman, M. (2020, November 11). How Hybrid Learning Is (and Is Not) Working During COVID-19: 6 Case Studies. *Education Week*. Retrieved from: <https://www.edweek.org/ew/articles/2020/11/11/how-hybrid-learning-is-and-is-not.html#:~:text=Most%20U.S.%20school%20districts%20are,in%20person%20and%20online%20instruction.&text=Many%20students%20chose%20to%20learn,and%20the%20rest%20at%20home>.

² Roy, A. (2020, April 3). The pandemic is a portal. *The Financial Times*. Retrieved from: <https://www.ft.com/content/10d8f5e8-74eb-11ea-95fe-fcd274e920ca>.

³ Presentation of Governor Bob Wise (October 2020), available at <https://youtu.be/zI9YONuY-E0?t=1582>.

Additional Information

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For inquiries, contact Amy Berman, Deputy Director (aberman@naeducation.org), or Dian Dong, Senior Program Officer (ddong@naeducation.org).

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