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## The Pandemic as the Time to Interrupt Harm and Foster Healing through Schooling

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# The Pandemic as the Time to Interrupt Harm and Foster Healing through Schooling

*Jessica Martell*

Amidst the onslaught of a global pandemic, in mid-March of 2020, New York state and local officials confirmed what many of New York City's (NYC) students, teachers, and parents were fearful of—that school buildings would be closed immediately and remain that way until more information regarding COVID-19 was available.

Instructions were given to all of NYC's nonessential workers to remain quarantined until further notice. Initially, I was relieved to learn that I would not be required to leave my home, limiting my risk of exposure to the virus. As an NYC public elementary school teacher, the spouse of an NYC public middle school teacher, and the parent of two NYC public school children, my initial concern was the health of my family, students, and friends/colleagues.

During the days that followed this announcement, teachers were asked to report to their school buildings sans students. The days were spent learning how to develop and deliver virtual lessons, contacting the families of our students, and picking up as many teaching materials as possible. Those few days were filled with uncertainty, with no one to rely on for definitive answers. Nevertheless, like every other teacher, I knew I had to do the best I could for my students in this unique situation.

I packed as many picture books as I could carry, all my students' contact information, and a few other supplies. I did not know how long we would be in quarantine and could not predict exactly what I would need for this new way of teaching. When I left my classroom, I felt incomplete. Although I had never done it before, I was to begin “remote teaching” on the following Monday morning, just one week after the decision to shut down schools was made.

I was certain that the situation would be temporary and that we would all return to “normal” after the scheduled spring break. I was wrong. As soon as I learned that I could not return to my classroom and was expected to teach from home, I fell into a state of mourning. I mourned the loss of “my normal” and struggled with adapting to this “new normal.” I mourned not being able to see my students, my colleagues, and the spaces for learning and growing we created together. Like many of my colleagues, I was distraught when elected officials decided to keep schools closed for the remainder of the school year.

I worried that my students' learning would be interrupted if things did not return to the way they were before the mandated quarantine—that they would fall behind on academics and the social-emotional work we had done together. Many students did struggle with being away from their peers and some shared that they missed seeing us (their teachers). However, there were also several who seemed to feel safer and appeared more relaxed learning from home.

During one of our morning meetings, I asked my students what they thought about learning from home. Some admitted to preferring being at home because it was “calmer” and they felt safer. Seeing them on Zoom meetings looking relaxed and happy was refreshing but it also made me question whether the physical classroom space felt safe for all my students. I wondered, why don't all children feel safe and comfortable in my classroom? In our classrooms? In our school?

The responses from my students who favored the safety and warmth of their own homes should not have surprised me. Although I think of myself as a teacher who is pedagogically thoughtful and works to foster inclusive practices, I recognize that there have been times where I have been complicit with policies that exclude and harm children. Our school system has worked as a site of “fixing” and “rehabilitating,” creating spaces of hurt, trauma, and soul-breaking.

The COVID-19 pandemic provided an opening for me to reexamine my complicity, embracing the invitations issued by scholars Arundhati Roy (2020)—to revision the pandemic as a portal—and Bettina Love (2020), who reminds us that we (educators) cannot go back to the way things were. Love calls upon all of us to use this time to radically dream for what is possible in our schools, firmly rejecting a long history of mis-education for Black, Indigenous, and students of Color.

## REVISIONING THE PANDEMIC AS A PORTAL

The COVID-19 pandemic gave me time to reflect on what I missed about pre-COVID days, but it has also allowed me to acknowledge that schools were not serving all our students. As Bettina Love (2020) underscored, the way things were pre-COVID-19 did not work for Black, Indigenous, and children of Color (BICOC). In fact, our schools were failing our children. As teachers recognizing the effects the pandemic has had on our students, we can use this time to re-create spaces of learning that truly serve *all* students.

Arundhati Roy (2020) reminds us: “Nothing could be worse than a return to normality.” BICOC were being expelled at alarming rates compared to white students (US Department of Education Office for Civil Rights, 2016). The experiences of BICOC and their families were excluded from structural decisions and the curriculum. In NYC, BICOC were prevented from access to high-performing schools via admission policies that were created to keep those spaces white.

I do not want to return to that normal. That normal is not neutral, but deeply harmful for Black, Indigenous, and communities of Color. I have engaged with Roy’s invitation to revision the pandemic as a portal, carefully attending to what I want to take with me and what I want to leave behind as I walk toward and work to build an innovative future. Although the list below is not exhaustive, I hope it offers insights into the quest for schooling that is imbued with love and aligned with the practice of freedom (hooks, 2000).

## BREAKING WITH THE PAST

In breaking with the past and reimagining the possible future of our schools as a place of belonging for all students, I will leave behind: the right to exclude in curriculum and in teaching; and practices that normalize trauma under the guise of “mindfulness” and/or “trauma-informed practices.”

I believe that as we move toward futures of freedom, justice, and liberation, we must abandon the right to exclude in curriculum and in teaching. Schools must be a place of belonging for all students. The notion that “this isn’t the right placement for this child” or “this child needs more structure” not only excludes children from their classrooms but implicates them as the problem and excuses our schools and the school system in which racism pervades. Schools must educate students and sustain the practices developed in the families and communities to which they belong. Since this is seldom the case, changes must be made to schooling structures.

We must interrupt “mindfulness” and “trauma-informed practices” that normalize trauma, that teach our students to accept a history of trauma and ongoing harmful behaviors (such as the devaluation of their communicative practices). Teaching BICOC to control their bodies as a behavior management tool is what Dr. Angel Acosta refers to as “white supremacy with a hug.” Normalizing “appropriate” ways of responding to injustices and techniques for self-regulating perpetuates white ideals of what are deemed “appropriate” and “acceptable” behaviors. The mindfulness methods taught in our schools have been taken up by the upper middle class and exclude the meditating ways of Black and Latinx families who statistically are more religious than the white Americans who are imposing these mindfulness rituals. For example, white-ified notions of yoga and meditation are centered, while the healing practices linked to spirituality and the botánicas of El Barrio (where I teach) are marginalized.

## IMAGINING THE FUTURE ANEW

In moving toward and working to build a future that does not yet exist, I take with me a firm commitment to the abolition of anti-Black racism, to ensure schools as sites of belonging for BICOC, to abolishing categories and labels that serve to exclude and diminish. I seek to help construct a future where restorative justice (Zehr, 2015), healing (Acosta, 2020), and love (hooks, 2000) are as pervasive in schooling as white supremacy is in 2020.

In imagining the future anew, we must engage in social-emotional learning that is rooted in the abolition of anti-Black racism. That is, in addition to addressing the social-emotional needs of our students, we must address how systemic racism has caused and continues to cause emotional harm to our students and their families. We must engage in healing practices that will serve our BICOC. This necessarily entails a commitment to schooling as education and education as sites of belonging for BICOC. This is predicated on an acknowledgment that schools belong to communities. If our students, their families, and people—their voices, values, practices, and priorities—aren’t centered in schools, let’s change our mindset and rethink what is required and how we are working alongside them.

As we seek to imagine the future anew, let’s commit to abolishing categories of exclusion. This means that deficit conversations about children will no longer be part of our repertoires or of schooling discourses. Statements that include “doesn’t belong,” “needs a different setting,” “is behind,” “can’t learn here” will no longer be heard. We will stop pushing kids out and (re)commit to including them in our teaching, learning from and with them.

This will allow us to build a movement toward a collective commitment to restorative justice, which acknowledges that when harms are inflicted, needs are created (Zehr, 2015). Whether these harms were inflicted before children entered school(s), it is our responsibility to address the needs created. When students walk into our classrooms, we will acknowledge and sustain their full humanity.

We will engage healing pedagogies regardless of when, where, or how the harms done to our students were created. This will allow for schools to move from spaces where trauma is inflicted and harm is normalized to spaces where healing is centered and where love is ever-present. With the acknowledgment that “there can be no love without justice” (hooks, 2000, p. 19), we will continuously ask ourselves: “Are we engaging in social love or the for real, for real kind of love?” We will commit and recommit to the for real, for real kind of love.

## AN INVITATION

Taking Roy's invitation to revision the pandemic as a portal (2020), I invite you to do the same—to interrupt injustice and foster justice, with the aim of radical love, justice, and liberation. As teachers, we must reclaim this time as an opportunity to go beyond rethinking and head toward redoing and restructuring our assumptions, beliefs, pedagogies, conceptualizations of learning, views of communities, and practices and approaches to schooling. As the communities we serve and live in struggle with a triple pandemic (health, racial, and financial), we must position the following questions as a moral and ethical compass for our teaching:

*What must we do now to get it right?*

*How do we become a part of the necessary healing our students are owed?*

*How do we ensure that all students see their classrooms and schools as places of belonging?*

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**Jessica Martell** is a fourth/fifth-grade teacher in East Harlem, New York City. She has over 20 years of experience working with diverse populations in New York City public schools. She is a 2017 New York City Department of Education's Big Apple Award awardee and a doctoral student at Teachers College, Columbia University.