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Taking Flight: Giving up the Things that Weigh me Down

Karina Malik

The New York City Department of Education & Teachers College, Columbia University

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Taking Flight: Giving Up the Things that Weigh Me Down

Karina Malik

For the 1.2 million K-12 New York City public school students, their families, and their 75,000 teachers, the disruptions created by COVID-19 school closures created severe levels of stress and hardship. As a special education dual-language Latina teacher of Color, these disruptions have given me pause. They are a reminder of the workings of an inequitable system that lacks sufficient attention to the persistent stress associated with teacher burnout (Wong et al., 2017).

Let's be real: Teaching is a stressful profession. Stress is a problem that is particularly pertinent in special education. Even prior to the pandemic, "the annual attrition rate for special educators ... is twice that of general educators" (Wong et al., 2017, p. 412). COVID-19 has brought further declines in teacher well-being (Bintliff, 2020).

As a Latina teacher of Color working in special education, I have long felt the weight of professional expectations and responsibility. All this talk about the benefits of having teachers of Color for students of Color—and the studies that have documented these benefits—is powerful (Jackson & Kohli, 2016; Pham & Philip, 2020). But for teachers of Color already dealing with the fundamental stresses of being a teacher, it is critical to ask, "What kind of additional and unique pressures do these responsibilities place on us?" And, more importantly, "What kind of support is offered to teachers of Color navigating these pressures?"

While it would be easy to say that professional expectations and a sense of responsibility are imposed by others, this is not always true. For many of us, being a teacher of Color adds another layer of stress—not only the expectations that come along with it, but the hopes we have for ourselves as teachers. For me, my hope has been to suspend the harm that I experienced in schooling as a Brown-skin daughter of immigrants who was assumed to belong in special education. This led me to become a special education teacher predominantly serving Latinx children of Color, aiming to give them what I did not have—a teacher who recognized and believed in their wholeness.

And in the meantime, I was working (at least) twice as hard. As Ta-Nehisi Coates explains in his book *Between the World and Me*, I found myself entangled with the myth of meritocracy and pushed myself to work harder, striving to "be twice as good" (2015, p. 91) to compensate for the racism that too often discounted my expertise, preparation, and professionalism. In doing so, I experienced "the robbery of time" (p. 91) in other areas of my life. And my "own rules redoubled plunder" (p. 91). I knew that as a Latina teacher of Color, I had spent way too many moments "readying the mask" or readying myself "to accept half as much" (p. 91).

Despite the promises to recognize the importance of hiring teachers of Color for the education of all students, and in particular for the education of students of Color, it is critical to understand the conditions in which we work. I know all too well that, as Haddix (2017) underscores:

Simply recruiting more teachers of Color but doing nothing to change the current system would be a failure. Instead, this model would expect teachers of Color to come into a system that has historically failed [us] as students. Why would one expect this same system to do anything other than fail [us] as teachers? ... the blame for the failure will be on [us], teachers of Color. In essence, teachers of Color are brought in to address the achievement gap for students of Color, and when there is little change, it will be [our] ... fault. (p. 145)

I feel this guilt day in and day out. I often find myself working twice as hard to ensure the success of my students—predominantly Black, Brown and Indigenous Latinx. But whenever there seemed to be little change, I faulted myself. And this was already happening before COVID struck.

COVID-19 IN NEW YORK CITY

As New York City made decisions regarding school closures and openings in the face of COVID-19, the needs and norms of middle- and upper-class White families—the minority numerically, but a population that is majoritized and majoritizes itself—provided the compass for decision-making. When New York City schools closed and instruction was shifted from our school building in Washington Heights to the screen of my computer, any semblance of equity was ruptured. Unsurprisingly, the New York City map of COVID-19 incidence was nearly identical to those along racial and income lines (Tartar et al., 2020).

In New York City, as elsewhere across the United States during COVID-19, low- and no-income family members became relabeled as essential workers—delivering food and performing other “essential” services. For many of the students in my school, this had serious consequences that did not seem to be considered as decisions were being made about schooling. Many of my students did not have an adult available to assist them because the adults in their families were focused on survival. Reliable access to computers and the internet were a problem for many, as was finding a quiet place to focus on their schoolwork. Many older siblings were forced to juggle their younger siblings’ workload in addition to their own. In the meantime, wealthier families relocated to the Catskills and other suburban areas, seeking a reprieve. They contracted teachers privately to account for school closures, establishing “pods” that provided creative educational opportunity, outdoor learning, and extremely small “class” sizes.

THE BURNOUT TRIFECTA

COVID-19 brought about the trifecta that comprises teacher burnout: emotional exhaustion, depersonalization leading to lower-quality teaching, and a compromised and negative sense of personal accomplishment (Maslach et al., 1997). Teachers felt overextended by planning demands and uncertainties, which fueled negative and/or cynical attitudes and a negative assessment of self in relation to job responsibilities and tasks.

As I reflected on being a special education teacher of Color during the onset and first year of the COVID-19 pandemic, I paused to reassess the pressures and tensions I experience day in and day out. Wong and colleagues (2017) underscore the importance of these kinds of pauses and of reflection as central to intervening in and preventing teacher burnout. This is particularly important because teacher well-being has been shown to affect student attitude, confidence, and achievement (Price & McCallum, 2015).

I was inspired throughout this extraordinary time by Toni Morrison, who famously said, “If you want to fly, you have to give up the things that weigh you down” (1977, p. 177, paraphrased). I have been asking myself: What does it mean to keep going in ways that will allow me to fly, to soar as a teacher? What are some of the things I need to give up, the things that are weighing me down?

As COVID-19 closed schools in March 2020, it was hard to juggle ever-shifting and mounting work demands as personal and familial demands shifted as well. I experienced a pileup of stressors brought about by COVID-19 and its effect on my professional and personal identities and lives. This pileup is not an exception: “stressor pile-up is common in adults and has negative consequences for physical and psychological well-being above and beyond those of discrete stressors” (Schilling & Diehl, 2014, p. 73). It affected how I was feeling and doing. It led me to pay attention to the lack of support for teacher well-being and teacher stress.

COVID-19 brought about increased work demands and isolation. Social support became essential. But beyond teacher quality of life, teacher burnout warrants attention because it not only impacts student learning, but it particularly affects long-term outcomes for students with identified disabilities, as included in their Individualized Education Programs (Wong et al., 2017). Research affirms: “Teachers who experience burnout and stress should be provided with enough instructional support to ensure high teaching quality and student engagement as well as instrumental and emotional support to monitor students’ long-term progress, including monitoring IEP goals” (Wong et al., 2017, p. 423). This is because teacher burnout and stress are not problems of teachers but problems of schooling (Council for Exceptional Children, 2013).

SORTING THROUGH THE PANDEMIC

In her book of essays about freedom in the midst of growing authoritarianism, Arundhati Roy (2020) comments: “What is this thing that has happened to us? It’s a virus, yes. In and of itself it holds no moral brief. But it is definitely more than a virus.” Roy goes on to affirm that even in this time of despair, the pandemic has offered us “a chance to rethink the doomsday machine we have built for ourselves.”

I am engaged in this rethinking as I embrace the pandemic as a portal, as an opportunity “to break with the past and imagine the ... world anew” (Roy, 2020). Nevertheless, to break with the past, we need to reckon with some troublesome realities, including education’s past and present harms, which have resulted in broken trust—especially as it pertains to Black, Indigenous, and other communities of Color.

Instead of yearning to return to the “normal,” marked by racial injustices, the dehumanization and disposability of Black, Indigenous, and people of Color, the devaluation of teaching, and the education industrial complex (Love, 2019), I consider what needs to be tossed—what was harmful and no longer serving us as educators—and what needs to be taken forward to start addressing teacher stress and burnout, not in a palliative manner, but as an ongoing commitment and investment in the teaching profession.

TO TOSS

Here is a preliminary list of trash that needs to be tossed if we are to fly:

1. The notion that teachers are “essential workers” in times of crisis.
2. A system that values individualism and competition over collectivism, and leaves teachers on their own when it comes to learning and evolving within our profession.
3. The trap of thinking that teachers’ independence is conducive to efficiency.
4. Punitive teacher evaluation systems that treat us as though one moment of teaching defines us for the entire academic year.

Each of these items in the toss pile exacerbate our isolation, justify our lack of social supports, and fuel the feeling that we are fighting a battle alone. They contribute to stress and burnout, which are too real for teachers of Color who are teaching in a system where the majority of curriculum, of teaching, of teachers, and of norms are White.

TO TAKE

As Arundhati Roy (2020) advises us, COVID-19

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.

As we move through and beyond teaching in a pandemic, seeking to travel lightly, we need to carefully consider what to take with us. Given the importance of addressing the teacher stress and burnout that have been exacerbated by the pandemic, these are prioritized in my “To Take” list.

I believe that teachers’ well-being and their teaching—both of which are closely related—would benefit from prioritizing and committing to fostering:

- 1. Expansive Learning.** Our learning as teachers is reconceptualized as lifelong. This is accomplished by creating spaces for ongoing teacher learning and by humanizing approaches to teacher learning. On our learning journeys, we form learning communities rooted in the understanding that there is more expertise across communities than there is in any one person. This informs our commitment to horizontal collaboration.
- 2. Horizontal Collaboration:** Horizontal collaboration is prioritized in teaching because it offers us a deeper understanding of both ourselves and our students as learners. In this way, we actively work toward collaboration with those committed to teaching as freedom and justice. This fosters community-centered teaching and learning.
- 3. Community-Centered Teaching and Learning.** Education is for the community by the community. Involvement of the whole community, including parents, is facilitated to ensure that there is representation of all stakeholders. This would include holding meetings at different hours or providing what is necessary for parents to be present.

A CALL TO ACTION

If we rethink the pandemic as a portal, then we must act. The time is now. We must leave systems of surveillance that create stress and cause burnout behind. As we seek to take flight, it is essential that we actively engage in interrupting, challenging, and tossing the things, actions, and relationships that dehumanize us and weigh us down. This necessarily entails not only tossing disempowering systems and structures, marked by surveillance, but committing to and engaging in honoring each other’s humanity fully. In doing so, we have the possibility—and I would say the responsibility—to build a movement toward humanizing teachers.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Karina Malik was born and raised in Queens, New York where she attended public schools for the majority of her educational career. She is currently a dual-language, early childhood, special education teacher in Washington Heights, New York City. This will be her eighth year working in a 50/50 language model teaching both Spanish and English. Karina is also a doctoral candidate in her fourth year at Teachers College, Columbia University. Karina’s dissertation focuses on special education teachers who identify as Black, Indigenous and/or People of Color (BIPOC). Some of her interests include disability studies, inclusive education, and trauma-informed teaching.