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## The Pandemic as a Portal : On Transformative Ruptures and Possible Futures for Education

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## Introduction

# The Pandemic as a Portal: On Transformative Ruptures and Possible Futures for Education

Mariana Souto-Manning

In 2020, as COVID-19 made us pause, it also gave us pause, shedding light on inequities in schooling and society. As Roy (2020) notes, it “brought the world to a halt like nothing else could.” However, the tragic patterns of inequity unfolding before our eyes were not new; we were witnessing “the wreckage of a train that has been careening down the track for years” (para. 8). Inequities that have long existed in Black, Indigenous, and other communities of Color were accentuated by the pandemic, and the exacerbation of these inequities remains devastating in and beyond the United States.

As schools throughout the country and the world closed, I witnessed and even yearned for a return to “normality,” attempting to stitch the future to the past (Roy, 2020). Yet my own yearnings for normality were soon jolted; one could say I came to my senses. Initial short-term closures stretched on for months, and as an Afro-Latina educator, researcher, mother, and engaged citizen, and also as a woman and human being, inspired by Arundhati Roy, I came to realize that “nothing could be worse than a return to normality” (para. 48). After all, normality—in schools and schooling—has long been marked by damage, inequities, and dysfunctionality.

Rather than a return to an idyllic notion of normality, I found myself yearning for a more just future, considering: What if we were to reject a return to an oppressive past marked by harmful practices, pathologizing portrayals, and damaging pedagogies for Black, Indigenous, and other communities of Color? Recognizing that there is more expertise distributed in communities than in any one person—however educated or schooled an individual might be—I turned to researchers, teachers, mothers, and children to imagine education anew, taking up Roy’s invitation to re-envision the pandemic as a portal.

## RE-ENVISIONING THE PANDEMIC AS A PORTAL

On April 4, 2020, Roy published an essay entitled “The Pandemic Is a Portal” in *Financial Times*. I was introduced to the essay via [this video](#), published less than two weeks later, and really connected to Roy’s caution against the urge to determine and pursue the future based on our past. She writes: “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” (para. 49). Acknowledging the damaging “normality” to which she alluded and re-envisioning the pandemic as a metaphorical portal, a site for transformative ruptures, I paused to consider possibilities for reimagining schooling.

I was not the only educator inspired by Roy (2020). Gloria Ladson-Billings (2021) has published an article orienting to Roy’s call. She noted that “the COVID-19 pandemic exposed many of the nation’s vulnerabilities—health care, economic, climate, and educational disparities—and put us all on alert” (p. 68). Issuing a call to action, Ladson-Billings notes the “need to fundamentally rethink education and consider the pandemic as an opportunity to restart, or more precisely re-set, education” (p. 68), reminding us that “normal is a no-no” (p. 69).

We know “normality” has been marked by inequities. I believe that this past of inequities can be best understood through the lens of what Ladson-Billings calls “the education debt” (2006), accumulated over time and comprised of “the foregone schooling resources that we could have (and should have) been investing” in communities of Color (p. 5). Indeed, the many inequities resulting from the mounting education debt owed to Black, Indigenous, and other communities of Color came into sharper focus during the COVID-19 pandemic. These realities are top of mind when we think about why it is urgent and necessary to revisit the well-established but problematic function and dysfunctions of pre-pandemic schooling.

## REVISITING THE FUNCTION AND DYSFUNCTIONS OF SCHOOLING

What is the function of schooling? Is it serving its intended purpose? Might we largely agree that schooling is dysfunctional amidst the pervasive miseducation, exclusion, and failing of Black, Indigenous, and other children of Color? Dysfunction, Leigh Patel (2016) reminds us,

does not simply mean bad or that there is a lack of functions in our actions and words. Rather, dysfunctional means that our explicit expressions of function do not match the implicit functions that are actually governing our actions. (p. 30)

As we pause to (re)consider the pandemic as a portal, how might we attend to the possibility that the dysfunction of schooling “supports the maintenance of a more implicit, often damaging, structure” (Patel, 2016, p. 30)? And how do we resist our tendency to hold to what we know as schooling, even if such knowledge and perceived safety are rooted in assimilationist aims and, in fact, detract from transformation?

To avoid walking through the portal occasioned by the rupture between our past and future, “dragging the carcasses of our prejudice and hatred, our avarice, our data banks and dead ideas” (Roy, 2020, para. 50), how can we attend to the dysfunctionality of schooling? How can we walk through without seeking to stitch the future of schooling to its damaging past? How can we ready ourselves to imagine schooling anew and to make this imagination a blueprint for the futurity of schooling?

These questions are prescient; after all, schooling has failed to fulfill its professed purpose—to foster learning and cultivate growth, subsumed by commonly-professed (albeit thin) commitments to justice (Patel, 2016). Harnessing our commitment “to disrupt the centuries-long tradition of education as the primary sorting mechanism in society” (p. 30) is predicated on interrupting our complicity with its longstanding function in the enactment of injustice and the reification of racism and related bigotries.

The concept of dysfunctionality helps us understand the impact of schooling on early childhood education; its purported historical roots are dysfunctional. “The dominant historical narrative of early childhood education declares the field to have 1800s ‘European roots’ ... erasing (or at least ignoring) ... early care and education practices in Black, Indigenous, and other communities of Color” (Souto-Manning, 2021, p. 9). This dysfunction is visible today in the harm experienced by Black, Indigenous, and other preschoolers of Color. For example, Black preschool-aged children are suspended and disciplined at racially disproportionate rates (U.S. Department of Education Office for Civil Rights, 2016). Despite the extent to which norms have reflected constitutional violation, over the decades, the role of schooling in the enactment of segregation grounded in racism and entangled forms and systems of bigotry were very much part of pre-pandemic notions of normality (Khan, 2016).

As I have documented elsewhere, research shows that “children of Color withstand harm in schools via policies and practices specifically designed to protect white interests, yet these same policies and practices that are upholding racist ideologies and grossly inequitable outcome patterns continue to be situated as neutral” (Souto-Manning, 2021, p. 10). The dysfunction of early schooling is illustrated by its strong attachment to “the settled expectations of relative white privilege as a legitimate and natural baseline” (Harris, 1993, p. 1714), against which growth, development, and learning are scaled and rated.

Schooling is serving the function for which it was designed—to sort, assimilate, and devalue the language and cultural practices, as well as the ways of being and knowing, of Black, Indigenous, and other communities of Color. This dysfunctional function, produced and reproduced by “the doomsday machine we have created” (Roy, 2020, para. 48), serves, in the United States, the status quo, rather than prioritizing the humanity, well-being, and possible futures of the growing majority of Black, Indigenous, and other children and families of Color the education system purports to (also) serve.

## RACIAL CAPITALISM

The profits and benefits reaped from children, youth, families, and communities of Color can be best understood through the lens of racial capitalism, a theoretical lens that allows us to understand how “white people and predominantly white institutions derive value from nonwhiteness” (Leong, 2013, p. 2154). Although not new, it allows us to attend to how, for example, the marginalized presence of Black, Indigenous, and other children of Color in schooling is in itself “a useful means for white individuals and predominantly white institutions to acquire social and economic benefits while deflecting potential charges of racism and avoiding more difficult questions of racial equality” (p. 2155). Such deployments of racial capitalism ensure and prioritize “racial representation at its thinnest and most tokenistic” (p. 2157) while evading transformation in the pursuit of justice.

Roy (2020) explains:

[U]nlike the flow of capital, this virus seeks proliferation, not profit, and has, therefore, inadvertently, to some extent, reversed the direction of the flow. It has mocked immigration controls, biometrics, digital surveillance and every other kind of data analytics, and struck hardest—thus far—in the richest, most powerful nations of the world, bringing the engine of capitalism to a juddering halt. Temporarily perhaps, but at least long enough for us to examine its parts, make an assessment and decide whether we want to help fix it, or look for a better engine. (para. 5)

Racial capitalism, fueled by the flow of capital, was disrupted, to some extent—even if only temporarily—by the pandemic. The stronghold of testing in college admissions was loosened. Tools for scaling and rating students did not seem as durable as they once had been. Considering that the elimination of SAT and ACT requirements has been shown to lead to more diverse student bodies with no negative outcomes on graduation rates (Syverson et al., 2018), these patterns invite us to imagine new opportunities for change. If we reject the desirability and acceptability of fixing and reestablishing that broken system, we must seize this disruption to racial capitalism as a space for the pandemic to be (re)positioned as a potential transformative rupture (Delgado Bernal & Alemán, 2017).

## THE PANDEMIC AS TRANSFORMATIVE RUPTURE

Transformative rupture involves attending to “those incidents, interactions, experiences, and moments that expose and interrupt pervasive coloniality and structural inequities” (Delgado Bernal & Alemán, 2017, p. 5). This means that in classrooms, schools, and other educational spaces there needs to be a “sustained creation of small, but significant anticolonial shifts in inequitable practices, discourses, and policies” (p. 5). The “fissures” in oppressive structures (p. 5) are transformative rupture opportunities, which shed light onto possible futures. In this case, COVID-19-related interruptions to flows of capital and racial capitalism brought hardship, harm, and despair, but also offered us an opportunity to rethink schooling, to (re)consider what we might bring with us into a post-pandemic future and what we might leave behind.

The pieces that comprise this special issue of the Bank Street *Occasional Paper Series* offer situated representations of transformative ruptures. They offer insights into practices, experiences, and theories that disrupt commonplace, long-established educational structures. From a variety of vantage points, researchers, teachers, mothers, and young children offer windows into how and why we must “push against the normative practices, policies, cultures, or spaces” of schooling (Delgado Bernal & Alemán, 2017, p. 87). They illustrate sites of transformative rupture, offering powerful insights into “how disruption of everyday reality can allow educators, scholars, students, and community members to envision and imagine a very different future” (p. 87).

## NORTH STAR LOGIC

As Roy reminds us, COVID-19 “holds no moral brief” (2020). Yet as a social phenomenon, this virus demands that we act. I propose that the appropriate actions are not simple practices of personal resistance, but proactive explorations of how Black, Indigenous, and other people of Color, and co-conspirators, as well, may undertake the work and provision of collective liberation (Love, 2019; Shange, 2019).

At times of uncertainty and despair, when we don’t know what to do or how to deal with our anger, fear, and the unexpected, we can be guided by “a North Star logic” (Shange, 2019). A North Star logic rejects pedagogies of expectability that are often conflated with pedagogies of respectability, instead focusing on and enacting a “sociology of potentiality” (Povinelli, 2011, p. 16) that is “embodied in specific social worlds” (p. 14). This is important because the perpetual tension between what is and what might be accomplished—“between striving to persevere and any actual idea or action that emerges from this striving—provides a space for potentiality” (p. 9).

No focus on potentiality is without obstacles: there is “friction produced in the encounter between racialized futures and pasts” (Shange, 2019, p. 65). Despite frictions and tensions between past and future, however, the kind of schooling we need is marked by movement toward freedom and emancipation.

## TOWARD FREEDOM AND EMANCIPATION

Stories of potentialities matter, and perhaps their importance is more salient during our most uncertain times. Such stories allow us to explore currents and uncertainties. Some allow us to bring closure to a past of oppression and envision futures of possibility.

Reflecting on Roy’s conceptualization of the pandemic as a portal, in this special issue, stakeholders with various vantage points offer their visions of what lies on the other side of this unprecedented disruption. With the understanding that “nothing could be worse than a return to normality” (Roy, 2020, para. 48), this issue of the Bank Street *Occasional Paper Series* offers insights into possible futures and how we might move to abolish harms enacted in and by schooling as it currently exists.

Looking at possibilities to move toward emancipation and freedom, I invited teacher educators, teachers, parents, and children to help re-envision the pandemic as a portal—seizing the transformative rupture brought about by COVID-19. Contributors were asked to think of the pandemic as a gateway, reflecting on what they want to leave behind and what they will take with them as they commit to moving toward justice in education. As the pandemic broke through the encapsulation of schooling within the physical spaces of school buildings and preschool settings, I sought to capture the perspectives, experiences, and voices of multiple social actors. Whether they were involved in research, teaching, community engagement, mothering, or learning, their pieces serve as windows into the domain of potentiality.

I specifically sought articles that offered critical, humanizing perspectives with a goal of re-envisioning possibilities for schooling post-pandemic that align with the goal of interrupting and transforming a miseducative past (Woodson, 1933). With the understanding that we should not be yearning to return to a past characterized by inequities, injustices, and oppression—combined with the belief that “The Future is Female” (Chmaj, 1979, p. 361)—this issue of the Bank Street *Occasional Paper Series* is authored by an all-girl/womxn cast who brilliantly offers insights into possible futures, considering opportunities to rethink education and abolish the patterns of harm too-often enacted in and by schooling as it currently exists.

## THIS SPECIAL ISSUE

This special issue begins with four articles authored by Black and South East Asian women who describe researchers’ reimaginings of education that center the humanity and ingenuity of Black, Indigenous, and other communities of Color. Boveda and Allen invite us to disrupt isolation by enacting Black feminism and humanizing pedagogy, breaking through neoliberal expectations of the westernized academy. Madkins offers powerful pathways into re-imagining justice-oriented approaches in teacher education via the sustenance of #BlackGirlMagic —“Black girls’ and women’s universal awesomeness and brilliance”—leveraging *Verzuz* as a site of possibility for freedom and emancipation. Rabadi-Raol shows us the need for inhabiting in-between, liminal spaces that rupture well-established borders, illustrating the call for public pedagogical sites of possibility. Madu reflects on her experiences as a Black mother who gave birth to a Black boy during the pandemic, revealing the lessons she learned from Black male early childhood teachers and offering insights into sites of potentiality for Black boys.

Next, the issue turns to 10 teachers who identify as Black, Indigenous, and of Color (Latinx and Asian American), as well as a White co-conspirator ([Move to End Violence, 2016](#)). They reflect on their practices, identities, and priorities through a North Star logic.

These teachers—Bianca Licata and Katherine Cheng Stahl; Julie Orelie-Hernandez, Patricia Pión, and Rafaella Soares-Bailey; Karina Malik; Jessica Martell; Grasiel Diaz; Trisha Moquino and Katie Kitchens—offer visions of a future of transformative ruptures, centering the humanity, ingenuity, values, voices, histories, and priorities of communities who identify as Black, Indigenous, and of Color. Their situated enactments of North Star logic can guide us toward freedom: They insist on recognition of the humanity

of teachers (Licata and Stahl), the need to heal by (re)membering and (re)claiming memories teachers are often told and expected to forget (Orelie-Hernandez, Pión, and Soares-Bailey), the need for ongoing communities to support and sustain teachers of Color (Malik), the suspension of White-aligned notions of trauma-informed practices (Martell), the abolition of the carcerality of early schooling (Diaz), and the cultivation and sustenance of a Pedagogy of Indigenous Love (Moquino and Kitchens). Collectively, they denounce the silencing of Black, Indigenous, and other communities of Color, helping us to acknowledge damages inflicted while inviting us to reorient teaching toward emancipation and freedom.

Recognizing the importance of mothers in the lives of young children and in their care, development, growth, and futures, the next section of this special issue highlights the experiences of four mothers—Abby Emerson, Katie Harlan-Eller, Tara Kirton, and Katherine Rodriguez-Agüero—whose racial identifications are White, Black, and Latina. These four women offer letters to their children, situating the pandemic as a portal toward freedom. They center love, commit to the pursuit of justice, and—amidst uncertainty—embrace the need for transformation.

Discussion of the education, schooling, and futures of young children is incomplete without children’s perspectives. In the final section of this issue, five children—Amelia, Fiona, Jojo (Johana), Lela Joy, and Sara—offer their thoughts on what it was like to be schooled during the pandemic. Their work demonstrates that authoring extends to numerous dimensions and modalities beyond letters, words, and other symbols typically associated with literacy in schools and schooling. The photos, audio, videos, and artwork of these five contributors allow us phenomenological insights into childhood during the COVID-19 pandemic. As Hill Collins (1998) reminds us, “still young,” they are “able to come to voice much easier than those of us who have endured years of such silencing” (n.p.).

Amelia’s, Fiona’s, Jojo’s, Lela Joy’s, and Sara’s voices, images, artwork, and photographed experiences demonstrate the power of the home and of families in young children’s education. In addition to urging us to interrogate what and who might be part of a future that is more just and humane, more oriented toward freedom, the children remind us of the many ways humans can make meaning and be authors.

From being a super-shero while teaching her baby brother (Lela Joy); to enjoying computer schooling at home (Sara); to creatively responding to her teacher Mrs. Kim in a (mostly) remote Korean dual immersion kindergarten (Jojo); to exploring science with one of her dads, Baba/爸爸 (Fiona); to talking about starting in-person kindergarten with her *Papi* (Amelia), these young children expand our understandings of schooling amidst the pandemic, inviting us to learn from them as we move forward. Their contributions raise questions such as:

- How might we better attend to siblings and foster intergenerational learning opportunities?
- How might parents be repositioned in the ecology of teaching and learning after the pandemic?
- How might we re-orient schooling to an ethics of familism, collaboration, and interdependence?

I hope you will take the time to listen to their voices, to learn from their experiences, and to witness the power of their insights. They are our North Stars. As Eagleton (1990) underscored, young children

make the best theorists, since they have not been educated into accepting our routine social practices as ‘natural’ .... Since they do not yet grasp our social practices as inevitable, they do not see why we might not do things differently. (p. 34)

It is from this understanding that I invite you to engage with their stories.

Telling stories that orient to a North Star logic, the researchers, teachers, parents, and children who contributed to this issue take up Arundhati Roy's conceptualization of the pandemic as a portal. The authors in this special issue craft a liminal space to imagine futures aligned with the pursuit of justice and possibilities for abolishing systems of oppression, exclusion, and inequality. They reflect on what they will leave behind and what they will take with them as they commit to moving toward justice in education. My hope is that, together, the articles and contributions that comprise this special issue may lead us to reimagine education in the pursuit of equity, freedom, emancipation, and justice.

I hope that as you read, you heed Alice Walker's (1989/2010, p. 236) words:

Keep in mind always the present you are constructing. It should be the future you want.

May we—educators, parents, citizens, human beings—recognize the potentiality of the pandemic as a transformative rupture. In doing so, may we recommit to the pursuit of justice in the present we are constructing ... toward the future we want and our children deserve.

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