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## Educator Perspectives on Both Sides of the Pandemic: Inspirations Taken from *Hamilton*

**Audrey Cohan & Andrea Honigsfeld**  
Molloy College

The year is 2020; it is unrecognizable to students, parents, and teachers.

While struggling daily to redefine what pandemic teaching is—interwoven with the stress of surviving the disease, or even managing at-home life—teachers are challenged to be innovative in new ways. They are called to be agile, creative, digitally fluent, and responsive to varied models of instructional delivery. Hours are spent balancing home and work while designing virtual lessons, developing engaging activities, learning new technology and remote-teaching strategies, as well as determining which students may be lost along the way.

It is widely recognized and documented that not all districts are resourced the same way. Accordingly, the tools for both accessibility and ready-to-go technology impact new instructional models. This is compounded by the complex rollout of instructional methodologies across the nation, and uncertainty for the future.

As schools have returned to in-class instruction for fall 2021, teachers have once again adapted their instructional models. In this way, multilingual learners, students with disabilities, and other vulnerable subgroups of students will

continue to require special attention to receive accelerated instruction, and more personalized learning opportunities. Additionally, teachers need specific strategies to foster reentry into the routines of in-person learning through easy transitions while also addressing academic gains and losses.

This challenge must also address the impact the pandemic had on students' social emotional well-being. In this article, we will examine inequities—and many unexpected successes—that became apparent during the pandemic and continue to impact schools and communities. Furthermore, we will illuminate how teachers, schools, and districts can reposition for the future of education.

Along the way, we borrow a few lines from the musical *Hamilton* to both anchor our discussion and inspire our readers.<sup>1</sup>

Why *Hamilton*? The less commonly known story of one of our founding fathers, Alexander Hamilton, is retold by Lin-Manuel Miranda in a revolutionary way, using a range of contemporary musical choices and a highly inclusive cast, predominantly featuring emerging actors of color. What also inspires us about *Hamilton* is that it is an immigrant story with a recurring message of resilience, a need for change, and a struggle to make a difference.

The pandemic has brought us to a point when “history has its eyes on us”—thus, we took inspiration to share our perspective on this pivotal moment in time.

### Who Will Tell Your Story? The Voices that Matter the Most

During the pandemic, we spoke formally and informally with teachers around the country, and

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<sup>1</sup> *Hamilton: An American Musical*, music and lyrics by Lin-Manuel Miranda, dir. Thomas Kail, Disney Plus, July 3, 2020.

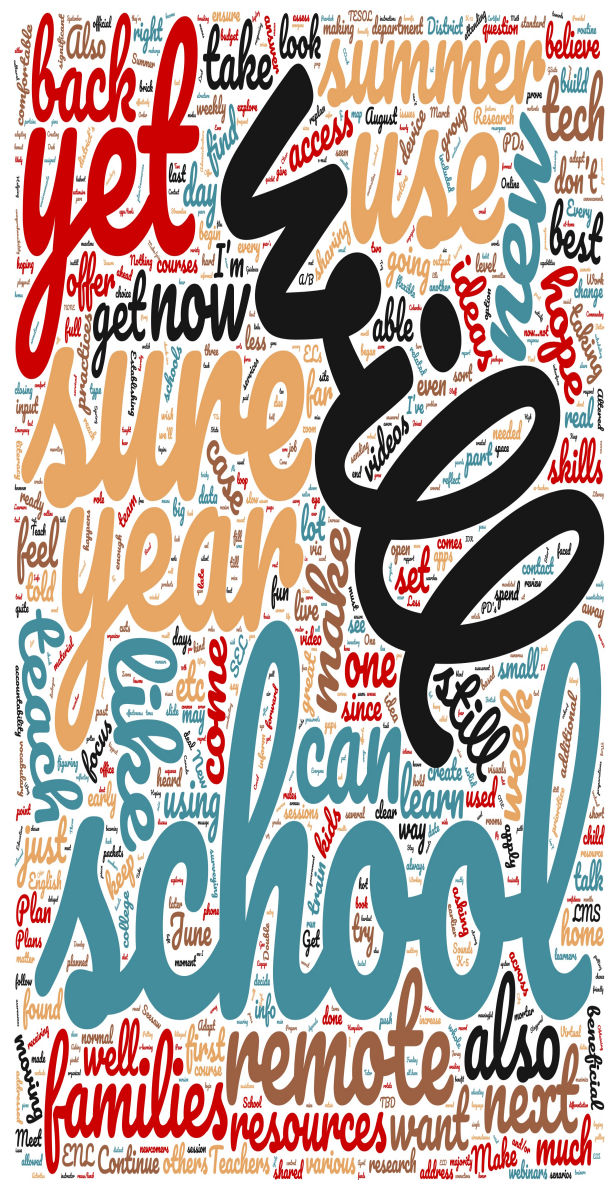


ability or opportunity (or lack thereof) to connect with their students and their families. Frequently cited causes for this include communication barriers, and lack of access to technology (including devices and reliable Internet access). Participants also shared their deep commitment. Namely, the extraordinary amount of time and effort it took them to reach out to their students in hopes to stay connected as they were learning from home (or in a hybrid setting), and to meet their academic priorities. We captured all the written responses in the first of our two word clouds.

In addition, we also surveyed the respondents regarding their future plans, and expectations; trying to uncover both individual, and collective next steps. We gathered answers to the following question:

What are your own (or your school's/district's) professional plans to be better prepared for next fall? You can respond with a list of words, a few quick phrases, a few sentences or offer a more comprehensive answer if you wish to do so.

The participants demonstrated heartfelt compassion and concern for their students. They emphasized a need to be mindful of the families' and children's well-being, and the urgency of staying connected with them. They also noted the mismatch between students' home lives, and other realities; especially when schoolwork is delivered remotely. Moreover, they underscored the need for well-designed, on-going support for their students' academic learning and social-emotional well-being. Many recognized that the future is full of unknowns. They informed us that their plans were still in progress; they did not feel prepared and had no clear guidelines on how to get ready for a post-pandemic school year. The second of our word clouds captures the written responses.



## Teacher Voices-Hamilton Lens

At the onset of the pandemic, *Hamilton* the musical became available through Disney Plus, allowing families to view a Broadway production while social distancing.

Like many others, we have been drawn to the brilliance of the lyrics, the music, the rich and the complex historical references, and the

creative interpretation of the past. The following are some of the most poignant lines from the musical, partnered with teacher comments—all with the pandemic as the historical background:

*The world will never be the same.*<sup>3</sup> Many educators recognize that what we are living through will make it into the history books. How we respond to the challenges and opportunities—that this once-in-a-century global crisis brought—influence not only our daily habits and classroom routines, but also our pedagogy. Since the winter of 2020, there have been new practices for hygiene, communication, demonstrations of affection, and so on!

Our instructional choices have also pivoted to include varied technology-based opportunities for students to access complex grade-level content, and relevant global topics of interest. Teachers have learned to highlight global connectedness and real-life applications through authentic experiences for children. In turn, students have learned to demonstrate their new understandings, critical thinking skills, and ways of expressing themselves through multiple modalities using academic text, visual representations, music, poetry, audio/video recordings, and personal narratives:

Most of the kids and a lot of us teachers have been stressed beyond belief with this virus taking over the world, and sometimes it feels like trying to shoehorn some sense of "normality" into this intensely abnormal situation is futile. I think that's mainly a feeling akin to grieving, but it's very widespread and intense.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>3</sup> Said during the introduction of Alexander Hamilton, the Company reminds the audience that Hamilton re-wrote the game, and the world will be changed forever.

<sup>4</sup> Anonymous Survey Respondent, 2020.

<sup>5</sup> Said during the introduction, the Company also ponders whether the audience and future generations will understand and appreciate Hamilton's journey.

*Will they know what you overcame?*<sup>5</sup> As educators, we have returned to school with humility and openness to understanding what our students and their families might have experienced. To this point, the social-emotional lens beckons us. There is a great need to focus on how our multilingual learners, students with disabilities, and other vulnerable student populations navigate their own emotions and aspirations (as well as build relationships with others).

In our recently published book, *From Equity Insights to Action: Critical Strategies for Teaching Multilingual Learners* (2022), we encourage all educators to collaborate and talk about the different perspectives of teachers, parents, communities, and students as we return to our "new normal."<sup>6</sup>

Let's not give up the collaboration and relationship-building as we continue to harness the power of connections:

Relationships need to come first. Working with young kids in a time of crisis, uncertainty, and strange transitions does not exactly create ideal conditions for learning, let alone language development. I think my biggest mistake was to assume that the epidemic situation would be much more temporary than it was, and I had unreasonable expectations for my students' capacity for resilience, self-management, and learning accountability. If I could do it all again, I would slow the train down and focus on maintaining contact and approachability with my students before trying to do any meaningful instruction.<sup>7</sup>

*Have I done enough?*<sup>8</sup> It must not be forgotten that we have lived through collective trauma and daily uncertainties like never before. During the

<sup>6</sup> Andrea Honigsfeld, Maria G. Dove., Audrey Cohan, and Carrie McDermott Goldman, *From Equity Insights to Action: Critical Strategies for Teaching Multilingual Learners* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin, 2022).

<sup>7</sup> Anonymous Survey Respondent, 2020.

<sup>8</sup> In the Afterstory, Eliza Hamilton addresses the audience directly with her reflection on whether she has done enough to carry on her husband's legacy.

harshest months of the pandemic, we frequently reminded educators and ourselves to give grace and accept that family situations may abruptly change. As educators, let's continue to find ways to overcome the self-doubt and fatigue that the pandemic continues to cause.

We also need to resist a return to former inequitable practices, and instead intentionally disrupt traditional approaches that do not serve our most vulnerable and historically-marginalized students:

Our district did an amazing job with remote learning. I'm humbled by the strength of our teachers and coaches that never allowed this challenge to affect students negatively. They checked in with students via Zoom, conducted mini lessons, & small group instruction; had parent meetings, distributed & delivered food, shared resources on counseling, and engaged students throughout.<sup>9</sup>

*Look around, look around, how lucky we are to be alive right now!*<sup>10</sup> In the wake of COVID-19, numerous reports concluded that there was staggering and disproportionate impacts on communities of color, families living in poverty, and those without access to the Internet; namely, inequitable education, mental health, and other resources and services. Despite all the challenges and struggles, many students demonstrated academic and social resilience. Furthermore, some parents supporting their children with school-related and social-emotional challenges developed a new-found appreciation for purpose of schools:

I've learned that I had to engage parents 1:1 to assist me with creating a learning environment

for their child. I had to first educate the parent, so that they could aid in the learning process.<sup>11</sup>

*There is a million things I have not done, just you wait!*<sup>12</sup> There is an urgency as we return to the physical classroom to bring fresh energy and an enhanced commitment to address disproportionalities as well as inequities in and outside of the school. This equity work is just beginning and will require a dual lens.

First, educators need to reconnect with their students and address their social emotional learning by creating a safe and supportive classroom environment. By setting a positive and affirming emotional climate, we can also develop students' agency through co-created and co-developed curriculums:

Right now, it's hard to plan since there is no clear idea of what the fall will look like. I hope to spend some time exploring new programs and thinking of new ways to be flexible in a learning plan that can be implementing online and/or in real life.<sup>13</sup>

From our research and survey data, we have come to firmly believe that self-reflective opportunities did grow out of the pandemic as most people worked and attended school from home. As students and teachers peered out their windows daily, both literally and figuratively—and in many ways the world seemed to have turned upside down—the time to examine personal hopes and dreams was current. In addition, for those who monitored hospital rates, deaths, and financial impacts there were new lenses of inequities that could simply not be ignored.

Resilience, self-reliance, strategies for coping, and agency are essential dispositions that we

<sup>9</sup> Anonymous Survey Respondent, 2020.

<sup>10</sup> Said when the Schuyler Sisters are introduced in the play, their exuberance is captured in a song that highlights their fierce energy and passion for life.

<sup>11</sup> Anonymous Survey Respondent, 2020.

<sup>12</sup> Alexander Hamilton's eagerness to bring about change is a recurring line in the play suggesting that there is so much more that needs to be done to serve his country.

<sup>13</sup> Anonymous Survey Respondent, 2020.

should not give up by going back to our former ways of living.

## What Have We Given Up? What Have We Gained?

Our students have developed new skillsets!

They have learned how to participate in virtual meetings and nurtured their leadership skills. Students stepped up to help teachers who did not have the technological background to problem-solve online issues and often were co-hosts during Zoom sessions or assisted in monitoring chats. Many students demonstrated their confidence and competence using computers and taking responsibility for their own learning. Anecdotal evidence already indicates that increased self-directed learning and executive functioning activities were positive unintended outcomes of the pandemic.

Did that mean that all students benefited?

No. Clearly, there were students who did not attend class regularly or at all, did not have the needed technology, or barely participated.

We have learned about a growing number of social-emotional issues, and even suicides that plagued our most vulnerable populations. And yet, the vast number of teachers worked long hours to reach their students and provide stability during this “new normal.” They also collaborated with their colleagues to make pedagogical choices, shared shortcuts, and strategies that worked:

The teamwork of teachers was amazing as we worked closely together remotely. We were able to share the workload equally and supported each other’s students as well as our own.<sup>14</sup>

## Will Teachers Stay?

As we continue to observe the worrisome spike in virus exposures and the reality of a growing number of mutations during the pandemic, we also recognize an aging population of teachers that felt they were at-risk when entering school buildings. In some districts, hiring substitute teachers became nearly impossible, even when the daily pay was raised.<sup>15</sup> Many districts were already facing chronic teacher shortages, and this was complicated by the lack of technological savvy needed by most districts as they transitioned to online learning.

The metrics that informed the teacher shortages pre-COVID remained key concerns of district leaders, especially those in lower-income communities. These metrics included available school funding, safety, salaries that keep some teachers barely above the poverty line, under-resourced teaching and learning environments, limited professional development to support teachers for a dedicated career span, an imbalance in the selection process for teachers, and an overall lack of respect within districts as well as from external pressures and criticism.

As we reboot and reposition districts for the next possible wave of the pandemic or simply return to face-to-face instruction, it remains obvious that the need for well-prepared, quality teachers with content and pedagogical expertise will be the core of the future education of this country. The question remains: How can schools create opportunities for students to thrive?

<sup>14</sup> Anonymous Survey Respondent, 2020.

<sup>15</sup> Natasha Singer, “Pandemic Teacher Shortages Imperil In-Person Schooling,” *New York Times*, January 19, 2021, A6.

## Some Unexpected Successes

The importance of family engagement—especially for English learners and other “at-risk” student populations—can be found in the literature for over a decade. Tung and her colleagues stated:

The sense of collective efficacy was not confined within the school building’s walls. A key aspect of the coaches’ effectiveness was the trust that they earned from families. Because of this trust, English [language learners’] families were open to advice and feedback about their children’s classroom placement, academic progress, and additional suggested resources for their learning.<sup>16</sup>

The pandemic has once again brought this concept to the forefront, as more parents need to assist their young children in accessing the tools for remote instruction and have become an active part of the learning environment. Parents often overhear lessons if they are working nearby or share technology with their children, along with the hecticness of short class periods (characteristic of high schools) and the joy of students when they see their peers.

We already recognize that leveraging community members is one of the most powerful ways to support students of need.<sup>17</sup> Increased family engagement in support of schools helps establish a culture of caring and mutual respect that benefits all students. During the pandemic there have been many stories of local communities sponsoring fund raising drives to buy

technology, providing food when the school doors were closed, and accessing library resources in ways never tapped before.

Although we did see learning disparities, we also noted that multilingual opportunities increased, and we believe that many communities came together without personal or political agendas. The goal was the same: How can we best educate our children? This question has underscored the path that we are taking in fall 2021 (and beyond) and informs the new teaching and learning paradigm of the future.

## Questions That Still Need to Be Answered for the Future

At the time of writing this article, the Delta and Omicron variants are dominating the headlines, and the CDC guidelines for mask-wearing shift frequently.

Teachers are still wondering how to reconnect with students whom they have only met virtually. But what about students who have never logged in or have logged off permanently? How many students have moved and are not registered in their new homes? Why aren’t children being registered for kindergarten?

During this unprecedented 21<sup>st</sup> century event, we have learned that “access” has many different meanings. Noam suggests that adding rituals to school programs is one way to “build strong connections between students and adults.”<sup>18</sup> The idea of developing new bridges—and continuing to build with families and communities—is one that resonates strongly for us.

<sup>16</sup> Rosann Tung, Miren Uriarte, Virginia Diez, Laurie Gagnon, and Pamela Stazesky with Eileen de los Reyes and Antonieta Bolomey, *Learning from Consistently High Performing and Improving Schools for English Language Learners in Boston Public Schools* (Boston, MA: Gastón Institute Publications, 2011), <http://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED540998.pdf>.

<sup>17</sup> Audrey Cohan, Andrea Honigsfeld, and Maria G. Dove. *Team Up, Speak Up, Fire Up! Teamwork to Empower English Learners* (Alexandria, VA: ASCD, 2020).

<sup>18</sup> Gil G. Noam, *Ten Big Bets: Transforming Education during the Pandemic and Beyond* (Pear, 2020).



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Our research shows that students and families who voluntarily tune-in learn more, access more, and interact more with others. One example is the creativity displayed by museums to bring their holdings to communities at large. These institutions have been able to leverage their assets and reach more people than ever before. In some cases, allowing for free admission to exhibits, shows, concerts, and plays. Like the wider accessibility to *Hamilton*, it no longer matters if you can afford the ticket fee.

## Conclusion

While arguments about learning loss versus learning gains continue to reverberate within districts, the pandemic has offered a unique experience to reflect on how schools can change.

As we have witnessed firsthand, many students demonstrate academic and social resilience during the pandemic. Moreover, parents have begun fostering new roles in the educational process. Now is the time to closely examine the impact on our most vulnerable students and support them with academic and social opportunities.

Closing with another borrowed line from *Hamilton*: “Who will tell your story?”

Who will tell our story and what will that story illuminate about the COVID-19 pandemic? Our hope is that it is a story of resilient educators, students, families, and advocates for change, and a better future for all.