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Standing in the Gap, Post COVID-19

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*“If you know how to read, you have a complete education about life,
then you know how to vote within a democracy.
But if you don’t know how to read, you don’t know how to decide.
That’s the great thing about our country—
we’re a democracy of readers, and we should keep it that way.”*
– Ray Bradbury

I make the effort to vote in every election that is offered in my community. This morning, as I drove to my polling place to participate in our democracy, I was reminded of the first election I ever voted in. I will never forget casting that vote—thanks to the impromptu polemic speech my mother ambushed me with that morning.

I was in my first semester at the College of DuPage (Illinois). I had enrolled in a full load of classes, which began at 7:00 am. My morning “fast-break” by then had become routine. The night before, I would deposit my backpack full of textbooks, notebooks, and completed assignments next to the front door and set my alarm to awaken at the last possible minute to hurriedly get dressed and then silently slip out the front door at 6:00 am without disturbing anyone else in the household. I had it timed to the minute: exactly enough time to navigate the traffic, park, trek into the instructional building, grab a cup of coffee and a doughnut out of the vending machine, and then arrive promptly at the start of class. On the first day of the class, the instructor asked us why, on earth, had we selected a class that starts at 7:00 am (she was not a morning person, either). One student offered, “So we can get to our job”—succinctly stated.

This second Tuesday in November was different. On this dark, frigid morning I was surprised at the front door, where my mother accosted me with a serious visage and a stern tone, asserting “You ARE going to vote in the presidential election today, aren’t you? Hundreds of thousands of people have given their lives and fought in harm’s way for you to have the right to vote! Some people around the world are still dying for the right to vote!” Given the early hour, and that I was still at least half asleep, I stammered my startled response, “Y-yes, mom, ok, I will!” She proceeded to ascertain that I had my voter ID card, and that I knew where the polling place was located. Having passed inspection, I made it out the door and in the nick of time to class.

*“Education then, beyond all other devices of human origin, is a great equalizer of the
conditions of men—the balance wheel of the social machinery.”*
– Horace Mann, pioneering American educator, 1848

As I aged, I realized the wisdom of my mother. Voting is a right that, as a democracy, we are fortunate to have in the United States. True, not enough Americans exercise those rights, but even those who do are mostly interested in presidential and midterm elections. Unfortunately, those elections in which voters can usually have the most influence have the lowest turnout. For example,

locally elected officials such as town manager, mayor, school boards, judges, and city council members are entrusted with making decisions that directly affect the daily lives of residents, families, local business owners, school children, teachers, and many others in the local community. Typically, the votes for these positions have the lowest turnout.

I currently serve 57 fourth grade students, teaching English language arts and social studies. One of those students is currently reading on the fourth-grade level; the other 56 students are reading at the third-, second-, or first-grade reading level or below. Just last week, we were learning about Colonial America and South Carolina. One of the lessons illustrated the life of the enslaved African population, including that at one time, it was illegal for slaves to learn how to read or write. I seized the teachable moment to emphasize with the students the importance of being a strong reader and raising their MAP Reading scores. My urgency must have been apparent, as one student asked, “Why is that so important?” We then engaged in an extended lesson regarding their future aspirations and how essential reading and graduating high school is to life, liberty, the pursuit of their own happiness, and their lives as citizens in our democracy. In essence, to value life, liberty, and the pursuit of their own happiness is to value being human more than seeking fame, power, and money; such intrinsic and extrinsic values associated with human improvement will only progress through knowledge, and the best way to become more knowledgeable is by reading and graduating high school.

*“Fifty percent of people won’t vote, and fifty percent don’t read newspapers.
I hope it’s the same fifty percent.”
– Gore Vidal*

The Measures of Academic Progress (MAP) Reading test is a nationwide standardized assessment administered by the Northwest Evaluation Association (NWEA) that my students take three times per school year. This is the test score that figures prominently in the lives of students, teachers, and administrators in the education system where I currently work. These tests have always been high-stakes; data recently release by the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) suggest that the stakes and the challenges of literacy and numeracy for nine-year-old US students (third or fourth grade) are greater than ever as a result of the COVID-19 school lockdowns. Comparing student scores from before the pandemic (early 2020) to after the pandemic, student scores dropped in all areas, eliminating two decades of progress in math and reading in the efforts to close the achievement gap between high-performing students and low-performing students—typically low socioeconomic status Hispanic and Black students (Mervosh, 2022; Sparks, 2022). Researchers estimate that top-performing students who lost three points on the NEAP would need nine weeks of learning to regain lost ground, whereas low-performing students who lost 12 points would need nearly nine months to regain lost ground—which would still leave them trailing the higher-performing students (Mervosh, 2022, para. 20). For educators working toward social justice and closing the achievement gap, the data are disheartening.

*“The ‘democracy gap’ in our politics and elections spells a deep sense of powerlessness by people who drop out, do not vote, or listlessly vote for the ‘least worst’ every four years and then wonder why after every cycle the ‘least worst’ gets worse.”
– Ralph Nader*

The implications for the futures of these student-citizens, and our country, are grave, adding significant challenge to achieving our mission “to educate and empower students to become productive and responsible citizens” (CCSD, 2022). It is in times like these that I turn to my work with my colleagues at our journal *i.e.: inquiry in education* to renew my faith and efforts to address the complex challenges facing educators in the 21st century. This issue of *i.e.* offers several interesting insights addressing educational implications of the COVID-19 pandemic, online learning, and teacher preparation. In the article **Investigating the Effect of Differentiated Instruction on Academic Achievement and Self-Directed Learning Readiness in an Online Teaching Profession Course**, author Fatma Özüdođru shares insights on scaffolding teacher preparation candidates with differentiated instruction to support development of teacher self-directed learning and motivation. In the study **Examining Preservice Mathematics Teachers’ Technological Pedagogical Content Knowledge Development in the Natural Setting of a Teacher Preparation Program**, author Büşra Kartal relates significant findings regarding preservice teachers’ experiences with 21st-century instructional technology and how it may support their pedagogy.

Early childhood education (ECE), a focus of interest by the European Commission and United Nations, is investigated by Dilek and Ilhan in **A Mixed-Method Examination of Early Childhood Teachers’ Pedagogical Competency Profile**, as the Turkish education system seeks to understand and support feelings of efficacy for the recent expansion of ECE preservice teachers in an effort to educate a growing enrollment of early childhood students. The study **Practices and Constraints of Teacher Professional Learning in a Centralized Education System** by Cansoy and Turkoglu provides comparisons that US educators will find interesting regarding the ongoing journey to enhance teacher professional learning (TPL). Authors Yi Jin, Jon Clausen, Angela Elkordy, Kiersten Greene, and Michael McVey discuss insightful findings regarding integrating 21st-century education technology integration using a game platform in their study **EdTec Tour of What’s Possible: Challenging Concepts of Technology Use in the Classroom Through BreakoutEDU**.

In **The Impact of Teacher Research on Classroom Practice and Teacher Autonomy**, authors DiLucchio and Leaman share findings about how a practitioner research project had a positive impact on teacher autonomy, confidence, and reflective practice. In the article **An Investigation of Elementary Mathematics Teachers’ Questioning Skills**, authors Yildizli, Yücel, and Günaydin investigate teachers’ use of open-ended, closed-ended, and real-life metacognitive questions, as well as teacher wait time, and explore the observed differences between the teacher self-reported data and their observational data. Author Sam Woolford offers an interesting and creative exploration of middle school students’ development of skill building, self-efficacy, motivation, and learning via a self-selected “passion” project in the article **Impact of a Free-Choice (“Genius Time”) Inquiry Project on Student Skill-Building, Agency, and Motivation**. And finally, authors Allen and Loven bring the discussion full circle in **The Impact and Utilization of Reading Interventionists** with their study regarding reading support services and teachers during “emotionally and physically demanding times in teaching.”

In the lack of judgment great harm arises, but one vote cast can set right a house.
– Aeschylus

As Georgia congressman John Lewis stated, “The vote is precious. It’s almost sacred, so go out and vote like you never voted before” (2012). I agree with him, and my mother: voting is a sacred right, hard fought and hard won. So is the right to read and write and the right to a free and appropriate public education. Our political system and our education system may be far from perfect; this predicates our involvement. As citizens and educators, we must stand in the gap and vigorously participate in these essential American systems. Together we must strive to meet 21st-century challenges and ensure that we are supporting all learners’ development into productive and responsible citizens. Forums such as *i.e.: inquiry in education* provide opportunity for conversation and deliberation, as we endeavor for continuous improvement in our essential societal systems.



Photo by Carol A. Burg, 2022

Carol A. Burg, PhD, currently serves as an English language arts and social studies teacher in a rural, Title I elementary school in South Carolina. She also serves on the panel of reviewers for several journals: Mentoring & Tutoring: Partnership in Learning (UK), The International Journal of Mentoring and Coaching in Education (UK), and The Qualitative Report (Nova Southeastern University, Ft. Lauderdale, FL). Dr. Burg’s professional foci include social justice, school leadership, change/school turnaround leadership, qualitative research, arts-based educational research, and doctoral student education and mentoring. For over 20 years, she served the National Louis University Florida Regional Center in various leadership capacities such as academic director, Florida EDL doctoral program director, and associate professor teaching various educational leadership, education policy, curriculum, and research courses within the educational leadership (EDL) and teaching learning and assessment (TLA) graduate programs. Dr. Burg’s degrees include: PhD, higher education administration, University of South Florida; MEd, interdisciplinary studies in curriculum & instruction, National Louis University; BS, psychology and music, Indiana University.

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