Black Ice: Teaching and Learning during COVID 19 - A Reflection

Brian D. Carpenter [a*], Jean Vasilko [b] and Jack Murphy [b]

[a] *Indiana University of Pennsylvania, United States.*
[b] *Greater Johnstown School District, United States.*

Authors' contributions

This work was carried out in collaboration among all authors. All authors read and approved the final manuscript.

Commentary

ABSTRACT

This paper recounts how the beginning of the 2020 pandemic affected schooling, teachers, and teacher education. This short paper recounts how the teachers and educators reacted to and continued working through the initial phases of the COVID-19 pandemic. There are journal postings, and notes about working with students and teacher education from the shared experience of a cooperating teacher, a student teacher, and a university supervisor.

1. INTRODUCTION

As the pandemic unfolded, we saw a swing in the public perceptions of education front and center. Early in the pandemic, educators were lauded for the incredible energy, time, and resources they provided to learning and to communities. On Facebook and Reddit, fathers and mothers alike applauded the second-grade teacher who could handle their child, let alone work on learning and development. Heartwarming stories of a math teacher working with students at the student's front door peppered feeds [1]. From March of 2020, 65% of secondary learners in K – 12 settings had shifted to whole or partial remote learning worldwide [2]. This upheaval disproportionately affected students from marginalized groups [3,4], and as COVID-19 continued, there was a shift in discourse, where teachers were portrayed as obstacles to a return

---

*Corresponding author: E-mail: bcarpent@iup.edu;

to normal for wanting and demanding safe working conditions [5].

These engagements and reflections about the structure and function of the educational system continue today with some who question a return to our pre-pandemic educational stances, and instead wonder, if we have been presented a unique opportunity to make real changes to an education system in need of great attention [6,7]. The reflections here add a glimpse into specific local decisions that were being made as everyone was reacting to a novel and unprecedented time.

2. SETTING AND CONTEXT

To help shed light on experiences in schooling during the pandemic, and to have a chance to tell our story, myself and two other teachers, share our experiences during the initial COVID-19 phase that occurred in March and April of 2020. Jean and Brian worked together with a university senior during his last semester of a Bachelor of Science in Education program that is a student teaching residency. Jean, the Cooperating teacher, and Jack, the student teacher, worked together daily, while Brian, the University Supervisor, did and was to do, site visits and observations while working with the Student Teacher. These three roles present a unique lens to consider the impacts of the pandemic on teacher education through our individual and interconnected experiences [8]. Our experiences during this time are presented to lend insight into how the shift to remote learning at the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic affected schooling and teaching.

2.1 Context

In this part of Pennsylvania, people of color represent about 30% of the community but make up roughly 45% of the school aged kids [9]. The median income for the area is $24,000/year though subsequently lower for Black ($13,000), and Mixed families ($10,000), whereas the Hispanic families' median is $31,000. As a referent, the current poverty level for a four person family is $26,500 in Pennsylvania [10]. These statistics help address the perennial question of whether Socioeconomic status (SES) affects schooling, which is continually answered the same way; SES affects schooling in profound ways including language choices, the language of schooling, literacy, and standardized exam achievement [11-15].

Western Pennsylvania, where the work took place, has been dubbed an "inequality belt" [16] and reports show the area provides some of the worst opportunities for students living in poverty [17]. As property taxes drive school funding in the United States, it is no wonder schools in economically depressed areas struggle with funding and services for students. Research shows these areas negatively affected students' educational achievement [12,11] and that these areas receive less technological material and support as well [18].

Our intention is to highlight and detail what might otherwise be silent and unmarked effects of the lived experience of educators during the pandemic. The excerpts come from journal entries for class, in the case of the student teacher, and requested reflections on the part of the university supervisor and Cooperating English teacher. We offer a multiperspective narrative of the challenges and opportunities that emerged during this period of collective educational work in the pandemic.

3. THE REFLECTIONS

As a university supervisor (Associate Professor, male – 58 years old, white, middle class), I often try to capture my initial impressions of the schools I visit, so I can try to better understand the communities I am visiting, as I rarely visit schools in the area where I live. Below is my first entry in February 2020.

> *Outside it is grey with just a bit of undercast sun beginning to show.*
>
> *It's cold, about 32 degrees with occasional snow flurries, salt trucks, and the occasional plow. …*
>
> *Pulling in and I was met by two armed police officers and an on-duty faculty member as well. I was asked to state my business, and I introduced myself as the university supervisor looking for Jean and her student teacher Jack Murphy. "Okay so you'll only be here a short time then?" "Maybe 90 minutes could be two hours, depends."*
>
> *"Okay follow me" armed local policeman leads way.*
>
> *We enter one set of glass doors, there are three broad sets of glass doors, which leads to a closed off entry way [it opens at 7:30],*

with a table and two faculty members sitting behind it with forms. This was next to the entry way to main office for the secondary/middle school and where I check in on my visits. In the entry way was one other desk where two unarmed guards sat and checked bags and ID. The armed officer went through a keyed stairwell that was due to open at 7:30, and he remarked It will get crazy in here when those doors open as he leads me to the doorway of the classroom where I will work.

Students of color make up about 25 percent of the small course I saw. The room is adorned on all walls with work, notes, points races, pictures, quotes, all bracketed in an off yellow, and there is a bank of windows looking out on to the back of a driveway and sports field. The room is bright and warm. Rows of desks facing the whiteboard.

The building houses both the middle and high school for the local area, which was described by one of the armed officers as "a little city with big city problems and crime." In this context, being a teacher is like driving on black ice. As a teacher you do not have a lot of control over how things will go, but you must use all your resources to get through without an accident.

This precarious context was hit on March 13th, 2020 with another storm of uncertainty and inequality: Covid-19. The classroom teacher notes in her entry how it began for her as we took our first steps into understanding, working, and educating at the beginning of the pandemic. She writes,

When our students left school on Friday, March 13 to the chorus of 'Bye! Have a nice weekend!', we had no idea that it would be the last time we would see them in person. Jack and I straightened up the classroom, in typical disarray after a full week of English and Literature classes and discussed our plans for the following week. Jack was starting a unit on characterization. We were approaching the climax of Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone and preparing to analyze red herrings in a mystery.

Our advanced students would be analyzing mood and tone in The Cask of Amontillado, which we had just finished reading that day. We were trying to be normal, even though things felt ominous.

The NBA had canceled their season. Schools were closing in other states. Colleges and universities were not returning from spring break. Not long after the students were gone, we got the news that Governor Wolf had closed Pennsylvania schools for two weeks and we left school feeling uneasy but hopeful that the plans we had carefully crafted would be carried out when we returned.

As noted, the "hopeful" part allowed the teachers to continue the process and flexibility that was being asked of them by parents, administrators, and the general public. Everyone wanted to be hopeful for their lives and certainly for the lives of their students.

The response to this new scenario demanded that we reconstructed our way of doing education as teachers and teacher educators. As the pandemic unfolded, the district planned and implemented a variety of strategies to reach families and students and create a space for learning.

Now, not only were the students being asked to stay home to work, but it also immediately began to display how students' material and home circumstances were affecting their very access to education. Before, public school provided a space where together, they could pass through doors and enter classrooms, but now collectively, each door and room were different for each student and teacher. The Cooperating teacher noted,

As the end of March neared, it was apparent that we would not be returning to in-person learning any time soon, and the district implemented a 'Continuity of Education Plan' to 'make a good faith effort to provide continuing education to our students.' Many schools were setting up online learning at this point, but the socio-economic realities of our school community prevented us from making this leap. While the administration searched for grants and funding to provide devices and internet access to our students, we teachers began assembling paper packets of learning materials that could be mailed out to students. Our administrators recognized that this type of learning was not ideal; nevertheless, they called us to 'provide adequate, realistic, appropriate, and equitable opportunities for our students to continue learning in the midst of this crisis.'

In addition, we implemented a plan to contact every student in the district by phone at least once per week. These weekly calls were meant to be a way to check in with students and help them stay connected, as well as provide support for their learning if necessary.

Jack, the student teacher, remembers his experience of packet creation,

Instead of distance learning, we had to create learning packets for the students. I remember it being a lot of work since we had less than a week to make 8 weeks of lessons. I know I wanted to create a packet for students that were easier to read and they would get something out of it. Initially the plan was to send out the packets and then use the Remind app to stay in touch with the students working on them. I'm unaware how many worked on the packets, but I did have a few students contact me with questions through Remind. I also participated in helping Jean call different students to ask if they received their packets. I only had two people pick up and answer, but I left the school number for them to call.

I did return to the school a few times in the spring to help Sharon and the other teachers print packets and to supervise while students arrived to clean out their lockers. Being in the school with no students in it was certainly a weird experience. I did feel reassured seeing the teachers coming in to help the kids by printing packets for them.

The student teacher's assuredness coupled with the hopeful disposition mentioned earlier, created an environment bent on solving problems or obstacles as they presented themselves. The group of teachers worked hard to address the students' needs and circumstances.

As Chrome books and paper packets became the norm, other modes of learning like Zoom filled the classroom gap and began to rush to the fore. The teacher continues,

I know that many schools were teaching via Zoom and other live platforms during this time. We were unable to provide synchronous online lessons, however, because so many of our students had limited

access. Instead, we posted weekly lessons and assignments in Classroom and then offered live office hours on Google Meet to provide help to students who needed it. It was nice to have these virtual connections with those students who were able to use them, but it also made me sad to realize how much my students were craving the real connections we were missing out on in the classroom. The students who came to my office hours mostly came to chat. After a quick question, they would spend more time filling me in on what was going on in their lives or just telling me how much they missed school. This frustration was even expressed in their writing assignments, such as a six-word memoir to express their quarantine experience.

The reflections on decisions made during this "stressful time" by the Cooperating teacher explains what she saw occurring in the community when she writes,

Most of the time when I made my weekly phone calls, I was able to reach only about half of the students I was assigned to call. This wasn't surprising to me, as we have many parents who change their phone numbers often, or who are forced to turn off their cell service when they can't pay their bills. Some of the students that I talked to were trying to work on their packets.

3.1 Students' Lives

The student teacher, while not a permanent resident in the community, began to understand more about the community and the lack of resources available. He notes,

I definitely was less aware of my student's home lives than Jean. For example, I had no idea that a majority of students had little access to the Internet at home. While some do, I have Wi-Fi at home, it didn't seem like they had the right equipment for online schooling. I learned from Jean that some of those students were submitting assignments on Google Classroom by using their PS4s or Xbox Ones. I was shocked when I found this out. For those of you who do not know this, it is incredibly difficult to type out a sentence on either system. Imagine typing on your keyboard one letter at a time with only one finger.

He continues,

> *Another student worried me when she expressed her isolation. 'For most of quarantine, I've hid myself away in my room, making social contact with barely anybody. … I reached out to her right away, and when she checked in with me during my office hours she told me that her parents were both frontline workers who were working long hours.*

Both Cooperating teacher and Student Teacher lives, and jobs intertwined with the students' lived experiences during the initial phases of the educational response to COVID-19. The three of us continued to work together to provide a reflective and valuable educational experience for the Student Teacher. An experience that had to move to Zoom for the duration of the semester, which made our weekly interactions different, but still very fruitful and engaging.

4. CONCLUSION

Our goal here was to share with you our small stories about working with students during the initial phases of the pandemic. Our stories help demonstrate the enormous challenges public education faced and how communities and teachers worked tirelessly to try and maintain a structured learning environment. The School District acted swiftly and decisively in getting learning into the hands of students. And in doing so, demonstrated the enormous challenges and pressures inherent in the students' everyday environment. We detail our experiences to provide a glimpse into some educational responses to the pandemic. And while we acknowledge the challenges frustrated us, we also acknowledge how important it is for education to have teachers and teacher education programs involved in these communities.

COMPETING INTERESTS

Authors have declared that no competing interests exist.

REFERENCES

1. Lee, Alicia. n.d. "CNN."
   Accessed June 2021.
   Available:https://edition.cnn.com/2020/03/31/us/coronavirus-math-lesson-teacher-trnd/index.html

2. UNESCO; 2020.
   Available:https://en.unesco.org/covid19/educationresponse
   March 4. Accessed June 10, 2021.

3. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention; 2021.
   Available:https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/covid-data/investigations-discovery/ hospitalization-death-by-race-ethnicity.html
   May 4. Accessed June 10, 2021

4. Gold JA, Rossen LM, Ahmad FB, Sutton P, Li L, Salvatore PP, Coyle JP, et al. Race, ethnicity, and age trends in persons who died from COVID-19: United States, May - August 2020." Morbidity and Mortality Weekly Report. 2020;69(42): 1517.

5. Dawson, Tyler. n.d. "National Post."
   Accessed June 2021.
   Available:https://nationalpost.com/news/canada/teachers-unions-throwing-up-every-obstacle-as-ontario-kids-return-to-class-ford-government.

6. Superville, Denisa R. n.d. "Education Week."
   Accessed June 2021.
   Available:https://www.edweek.org/leadership/lessons-from-the-pandemic-that-can-improve-leading-and-teaching/2021/03.

7. Spector, Carrie. n.d. Stanford graduate school of education.
   Accessed June 2021.
   Available:https://ed.stanford.edu/news/educators-must-resist-return-normal-urges-scholar-and-activist-gloria-ladson-billings

8. Puriefoy, Wendy. Telling the story of public education in America. Connections: A Journal of Public Education Advocacy. 2004;11(1):1-3.

9. Statistical Atlas. n.d. Race and ethnicity in Johnstown, Pennsylvania.
   Accessed June 2021.
   Available:https://statisticalatlas.com/place/Pennsylvania/Johnstown/Race-and-Ethnicity.

10. Pennsylvania Department of Community and Economic Development. n.d. Accessed June 2021.
    Available:https://dced.pa.gov/housing-and-development/weatherization/income-eligibility/.

11. Caldas, Stephen J, Carl Bankston III. Effect of school population socioeconomic status on individual academic

achievement. The Journal of Educational Research. 1997;90(5):269 - 277.

12. Battle, Juan, Michael Lewis. The increasing signicficant of class: the relative effects of race and socioeconomic status on academic achievement. The Journal of Poverty. 2002;6(2):21 - 35.

13. Bloomquist, Jennifer. Class and categories: What role does SES play in children's lexical and conceptual development. Multilingua. 2009;28(4):337-353.

14. Bernstein, Basil. The structuring of pedagogic discourse (Class, Codes and Control). Routledge; 2009.

15. Schleppegrell, Mary. The language of schooling. Routledge; 2004.

16. Schneider, Sarah. n.d. Five of the country's most economically segregated school district border are in western PA.
Accessed June 2020.
Available:https://www.wesa.fm/post/five-country-s-most-economically-segregated-school-district-borders-are-western-pa#stream/0.

17. Woldfman-Arent, Avi. n.d. "WESA."
Accessed June 2021.
Available:https://www.wesa.fm/education/2020-01-21/pa-provides-some-of-the-worst-opportunities-for-students-of-color-report-says#stream/0.

18. Mirza, M. Usman, Andries Richter, Egbert van Nes, Marten Scheffer. Technology driven inequality leads to poverty and resource depletion. Ecological Economics. 2019;215 - 226.

_____