



Journal of Liberal Arts and Humanities (JLAH)
Issue: Vol. 2; No. 6; June 2021 pp. 21-27
ISSN 2690-070X (Print) 2690-0718 (Online)
Website: www.jlahnet.com
E-mail: editor@jlahnet.com
Doi: 10.48150/jlah.v2no6.2021.a4

Black Ice

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In Fall of 2004, Wendy Puriefoy(Puriefoy) asked and presented the case for educational practitioners, of all forms, to tell our stories. What is presented here are cumulative reflections of three practitioners during the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic.

We have seen the public perceptions of education front and center as the pandemic unfolded. Early in the pandemic, educators were lauded for the incredible energy, time, and resources they provide to learning and to communities. On Facebook and Reddit, fathers and mothers alike lauded the second grade teacher that could handle their child let alone work on learning and development. Heartwarming stories of a math teacher working with students at their front door peppered feeds(Lee).From March of 2020, 65% of secondary learners in K – 12 settings have shifted to whole or partial remote learning worldwide (UNESCO). These upheavals have disproportionately affected students from marginalized groups (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention; Gold, Rossen and Ahmad). As COVID-19 continued, there was a shift in discourse where teachers were being seen as obstacles to a return to normal for wanting and demanding safe working conditions(Dawson). And here we are over a year in, and the push for normalcy continues.

During this year, the disruption to systems rippled across every sector of humanity. We have seen calls to reflecton whether we should return to our pre-pandemic educational stances or if we have been presented a unique opportunity to make real changes to an education system in need of great attention (Superville; Spector).

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. We worked together in a cooperative teaching environment inAuthor 2’s middle school English classroom, working in tandem with a university senior during his last semester student teaching residency, and the university supervisor tasked with observing and working with the student teacher. These three roles present a unique lens to consider and these reflections are a presentation of our individual and interconnected experiences.

Western Pennsylvania, where the work took place has been dubbed an “inequality belt“ (Schneider) and reports have shown the area provides some of the worst opportunities for students living in poverty(Woldfman-Arent). As property taxes drive school funding, in economically depressed areas it is no wonder schools struggle with funding and services for students.

It is of course no surprise then that research shows socioeconomic status to be an important factor for educational achievement (Battle and Lewis; Caldas and Bankston III) and that the distribution of wealth affects how access to technology is distributed (Mirza, Richter and van Nes). 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. The positions of the writers, public school English teacher, student teacher, and university supervisor provide a unique opportunity to better understand how students and teachers experienced this time.

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 English teacher. Maybe it must be said, these are our collective experiences and we tried to be mindful of the variety of challenges all actors faced in March and April of 2020, districts, schools, teachers, students, and parents all simultaneously having and reacting to novel experiences. Our intention is to highlight and detail what might otherwise be silent and unmarked.

The Entries

As a university supervisor, 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 Author 2 and her student teacher Author 3. "Okay so you'll only be here a short time then?" "Maybe 90 minutes could be two hours, depends."

"Okay follow me" *armed local police man 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 school 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." People of color represent about 30% of the community make up but roughly 45% of the school aged kids (Statistical Atlas). The median income for the area is \$24,000/year though subsequently lower for Black (\$13,000), 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 (Pennsylvania Department of Community and Economic Development). These statistics help address the perennial question of whether Socioeconomic status (SES) affects schooling, is continually answered the same way; SES affects schooling in profound ways including language choices, the language of schooling, cognition, literacy, and standardized exam achievement (Caldas and Bankston III; Battle and Lewis; Bloomquist; Bernstein; Schleppegrell).

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. Author 3 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. Author 3 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.

The teacher continues here as she relates a journal entry from one student about this time in March 2020. She notes,

One student wrote, 'I was so happy that day.' In her explanation she noted, 'It was so crazy how fast everything changed. I woke up for school that day like any other. Everything was normal when I woke up, but by the time I went to sleep, everything was different. I thought it would just be 2 weeks, and then everything would be normal again. I was so excited to have 2 weeks off because I was so tired of school.'

However, school is the one place that I wish I could be right now.’

As the pandemic unfolded, the district planned and implemented a variety of strategies to reach families and students and create a space for learning. Author 2 notes,

Even though the grants to provide a Chromebook for every student still hadn’t gone through, phase two of our district’s plan involved an online learning component using lessons created in Google Classroom. The district sent out a survey to parents to see if they had access to the internet and devices to connect them. They distributed the limited number of Chromebooks that we had in the high school to upperclassmen who needed to finish their credits to graduate or who were taking dual enrollment and needed to complete their college credits. This left out the 8th graders, who were given the choice between using their own devices to access Google Classroom or completing another paper packet. Some students had their own Chromebooks or laptops at home and were able to complete their Google Classroom lessons more easily, but others had to get creative. One student texted me via the Remind app to ask for help accessing Google Classroom from his Xbox. Many others used their phones. The students who used these kinds of alternative devices would read their assignments online, but then complete them on paper and take pictures of them to turn them in. Students like Ethan, whose internet service was shut off when his mom wasn’t able to pay her bill after returning from Philadelphia, received their second paper packet in the mail, with instructions to return it to the school to be graded by the end of May. This was easier said than done for families who relied on public transportation.

As the teacher notes, students were getting very creative in how they could accomplish their school work, while simultaneously showing the variety of material circumstances the students were dealing with. Now, not only were the students being asked to stay home to work, it immediately began to display how students’ material and home circumstances were beginning to affect their very access to education. Together they could pass through doors and enter classroom, but now collectively each door and room was different for each student.

The student teacher was in a unique situation as he was simultaneously teacher and student and resided at the intersections of district, building, room, university, and students’ needs and reactions. Just as the middle school students were realizing how these changes to a non-present format were affecting them, the student teacher and the Cooperating teacher began to also understand and realize how the upcoming learning opportunities were going to rely heavily on the purchased technology of the district or at hand home technology, to implement learning and development. Author 2 notes,

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.

Author 3, student teacher, talks about this experience of packet creation when he writes,

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 Author 2 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 the help the kids by printing packets for them.

As Chrome books and paper packet 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.

A journal entry from the student teacher about this time presents a personal reflection about this time. Author 3 notes,

Last weekend was probably my most hectic weekend in my student teaching career. On Friday, my placement school reached the decision to make packets for the students since not every student has Internet access. The administration wanted 8 weeks of review packets for each subject to be printed out by Monday. The other English teachers and I had to make 8 weeks of work for English and Literature. Luckily, they are very friendly and cooperative so we divided up the work with everyone doing four weeks. I did three weeks of English and one week of literature. It honestly felt like making a unit plan in a weekend, which I guess I did in a way. Each activity I created would count as one day and each week needed at least one piece of reading material. For example, I used a short story, a poem, an informational article, and an argumentative article for my four weeks. Fridays were left open for what we wanted to do personally. I tried to make the assignments fun, and easier since the students were out home. I also did my best to make sure the students would get something out of them, if they chose to fill them out. For example for my short story week I picked ‘The Dinner Party’ which is about a page and half long. I also selected a 100-word short story called ‘Baby Steps’ written by my Seton Hill professor, Dr. [Anon], who specializes in horror short stories. I thought both of these selections were short and easy to read. I think an 8th grade student can sit down and finish either one of them in one setting. I think it’s extremely important that students are still reading during this time. I know my students well enough that a lot of the reading they do in school is the only time they read. I think it’s important that they continue to read so they won’t fall further behind. I also brought back as many literature terms as I could like allusions, plot, point of view, and characterization. Also since I love creative writing I tried my best to include that too besides essay writing. For example, after they finish reading “Baby Steps” I gave them the option to either write what they thought it was about since it may or may not be about a little demon baby (a literary analysis) or write a 100-word short story on their own. I tried to give them options like that as often as I could. I think it makes filling out the packet more “fun” and less like your parents are forcing you to fill out a packet at home.

The other teachers and I collaborated on Google docs and put everything into folders. I was impressed by how quickly they were able to work! They either finished Friday night or by Saturday. I was up past midnight on Sunday double checking my spelling and rewording questions.

The Cooperating teacher remembers this time and work by noting,

Author 3 and I collaborated with the other 8th grade ELA teachers to create packets of learning materials that we hoped would benefit our students. It was important to us to provide high interest reading materials to encourage them to keep reading while they were out of the classroom. We wanted to provide them with creative things to think and write about.

We definitely did not want to send them a bunch of boring worksheets and busy work. So we spent hours putting together the best packets we could, while trying to limit our number of pages to keep the mailing costs down for the district. Two packets and 40 pages later, I felt mostly satisfied with the work we had done, but I was soon discouraged when I started making phone calls and was presented with the reality of the situation. It seemed that many of our students were not going to be able to keep up with learning during such a stressful time.

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. But one mother's story in particular helped me realize that packets of stories and writing prompts, no matter how interesting they were, weren't relevant to our students' experiences during the pandemic. Steven's mother sounded sincere when she told me she wanted him to continue to learn, but she hadn't received his packet. That was because she wasn't currently at her home in one of the local housing projects. She and her children were stuck in Philadelphia where they had traveled by Amtrak just before everything had been shut down. 'I came here to help my sister who was going through some things with her kids and she needed me. But now the Amtrak isn't running and I haven't been able to find anybody with a car to give us a ride home.' Two weeks later she was finally able to get home after she paid an acquaintance a few hundred dollars for a ride, but by that time Steven had missed out on several weeks of instruction and the district was moving on to phase two of our 'Continuity of Education Plan'. Going to school allows all the students to enter the same doors, travel the same hallways, sit in their assigned seats, and play their instruments, sports, or activities on their designated days. Now, they passed their time in the same place with fixed technologies and very little movement.

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

I definitely was less aware of my student's home lives than Author 2. 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 Author 2 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. Contradictory to this, I've been feeling quite lonely, longing for contact with friends. I've had [an] empty feeling inside of me, and I've had lost motivation in basically everything. I've been more low than I've been in a long time. I just... haven't been feeling like myself. I truly miss how life was two months ago, listening to fellow students joke around with each other. I've been hiding these feelings away, but now, they are really showing.'

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-019.

As the semester continued the Student Teacher notes the continuing efforts of the district and he relates what it was like to work and learn during this moment.

It was difficult going back into the school. For one, I had trouble getting in since I don't have an ID card and also teachers walking in acted like I was going to infect them. So it was both difficult physically and emotionally. Every printer was being used, so we were stuck waiting for an hour. It was nice to catch up with my mentor teacher in person, but I felt sad since I'm not sure if I'll get to come back this year. It was nice running into the principal too, because he's always so reassuring about everything. He used to be an 8th grade teacher at the school, so he really gets what the teachers go through and how to interact with the kids. He told me that even though I wasn't here for a while the one-week at Johnstown is like three weeks of experience at another school. He also complicated me saying I can use him as a reference and even saying 'You didn't have to come in here today and I think that says a lot.'

The principal also told me that he thought the 8 weeks worked better because it limits risk and he knew we could handle it. It makes sense because coming in every two weeks to print packets could get dangerous if the situation worsens....

While COVID made it difficult to be a student teacher, it didn't ruin my experience. It made me more aware of how a larger school district in a rural area had a more difficult time adjusting to a crisis than smaller school districts. For example many [District] students didn't have Internet access, which made initial steps towards teaching online challenging.

Conclusion

We began by citing Wendy Puriefoy's call to share with all Americans, the compelling stories of Education. Upon rereading her text it struck us that one particular passage that maybe rings as more true today, than when it was first published nearly 18 years ago.

The success and survival of public education is essential to the success and survival of democracy and civil society in America. In fact, just as American democracy created public schools, one could say public schools have created America's democracy.

(Puriefoy)

With the above stories we hope to have shared with you our small stories about working with students during the pandemic age.

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