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Aspirational Criticality in the Time of COVID

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Abstract

The pandemic of COVID-19, while devastating, has provided a space and opportunity for K-16 educators to reconsider teaching methods. By sharing our experiences, we aim to provide a glimpse of how we have chosen to positively respond to the pandemic and invite criticality. Through conversations and intentionality, we share our strategies and the theoretical underpinnings that have guided this effort.

Keywords: Criticality, pandemic, teaching and learning, positivity

Aspirational criticality in the time of COVID**Vignette #1 (The Beginning of COVID - March 2020)**

It was a Friday afternoon when we received a mass email from the district office notifying our faculty and staff that in light of the recent news, we would be teaching from home for the next couple of weeks. How would I explain this to my students without instilling even more fear in them with an already uncertain and scary situation?

HS Student A: How long do you think we're going to be at home?

HS Teacher: It won't be more than two weeks for sure!

HS Student A: This is crazy! They keep saying how this thing (COVID) is so contagious.

HS Teacher: Don't worry. They know what they're doing. It'll be fine. Remember to take home your Chromebooks; see you in two weeks!

As a high school teacher who had once imagined – with extreme doubt that teachers would ever be permitted to work from home – I was both shocked and relieved at the district announcement. We were told that we would be working from home for the next two weeks, and as a result, we should pack up our district issued laptops in preparation for this unfamiliar terrain. With these directives in mind, I reassured my students that we would be returning to regular in-person learning at the end of the two weeks. Boy, was I wrong!

A range of emotions has consumed the world since COVID-19 first appeared in the United States and none could predict just how much this unknown virus could alter our daily lives. Regardless of gender, socioeconomic status, political affiliation, or ethnic background, we all share one commonality - adjusting to a paradigm shift amidst a pandemic with limited information and knowledge. COVID-19 has impacted everyone, and as educators, it is important that we reflect upon our purpose in teaching and our responsibilities to our students, communities, and ourselves. With information about the virus and vaccines changing every day, many of the current issues and concerns that have pervaded throughout the government, have now entered institutions of learning as students of all ages navigate the return to campus. Some school districts have struggled to remain current with the changing information that influences the decisions they make about COVID-19 vaccinations and social distancing rules, which have had a tremendous impact on students and educators as they try to adjust to these new norms.

As educators who work in public education at both the high school and college level and are committed to the field of education despite the current climate and condition of the world, we hope to illuminate some of the worries and concerns we have surrounding this issue. Although we currently deal with daily uncertainty, we still believe there are opportunities for growth and introspection for educators, students, and the surrounding community. As educators in both the high school and college sectors, we have come to grips with the immense amount of pressure we have encountered in a time of global change. Despite the challenges we all face as teachers in the COVID-19 era, we each offer in-field experiences that help shape our outlook on teaching and learning. We recognize that this is a difficult time for everyone in the pandemic, but believe it is necessary to share some of our own experiences. We hope to highlight our optimism for the work we do and the actions we have taken to sustain positivity during a pandemic as well as create a space for others to share their own stories.

Meet the Authors

Our first author, Tonya, identifies as an Asian American female who teaches college mathematics at a 4-year public southeastern college. She is currently in her 6th year of teaching at the college level, but has also been a high school teacher (mathematics and Special Education) for over 8 years. As a mathematics teacher, she has had multiple opportunities to work with students from a variety of backgrounds and has seen and witnessed the struggles students have had to overcome in education. In wanting to learn more about ways in which she can help her students, she enrolled in a PhD program, where she is currently a student and has formed friendships with Brooks and Cheryll. She is currently interested in understanding why some students, primarily those whose first language is not English, continue to choose a career in Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics (STEM) despite the obstacles they continue

to face. She hopes to learn more about how students have been successful in STEM and would like to highlight their success/accomplishments.

Our second author, Brooks identifies as an African-American male and is currently a doctoral candidate at a research university in the southeastern part of the United States. He began teaching in 2011 and has taught various English, Social Studies, and Reading courses. He now serves as a high school Special Education teacher in the metro Atlanta area. His research centers around creating opportunities for Black high school students to examine their communities and write for critical social change. He currently incorporates critical literacy-based writing instruction into the classroom to help students engage in discourse and activities that relate to the present-day issues that concern them.

Our third author, Cheryll, identifies as a Black female who is a veteran high school English teacher. She is also a doctoral student at a local southern state university in a Teaching and Learning Program with concentration in Language and Literacy. She brings a unique perspective to the classroom and her work as a Canadian immigrant to the United States. Her teaching experiences span four different school districts across Georgia in her 25-year career. She currently teaches American Literature and Honors American Literature in a suburban county just outside of a metropolitan southeastern city, but has also taught Advanced Placement and other high school English Language Arts (ELA) courses. Her current research interests are concerned with the lived experiences of Black/African American (B/AA) high school English AP and honors teachers of minoritized students. She wants to understand how as an underrepresented segment of advanced English course teachers (Milewski & Gillie, 2002), they negotiate a Eurocentric focus in the curriculum and their potential to #disrupttexts of that nature (Ebarvia et al., 2020).

The next part of the essay focuses on our personal experiences as educators during the pandemic. Through our shared friendship and participation in a PhD program, we have learned that our current struggles are not isolated events. Despite these commonalities, we teach in different contexts and come from disparate backgrounds, but it is as a result of our common bond that we come together here to tell our stories. Brooks and Cheryl share their stories as high school educators, and Tonya shares her experiences as a college instructor by first immersing the reader in their lived experiences through the use of fictionalized vignettes grounded in their real experiences. The brief discussion preceding and following these vignettes is meant to highlight some of the uncertainty, doubt, and trauma students and educators faced and continue to battle during the uncertainty of this pandemic. The narratives we share cannot necessarily be generalized, nor are they meant to indicate that these experiences can only occur within particular contexts, but it is our intention to create a space for critical reflection amidst the current climate.

What are Students Saying and What is Happening in Schools?

High School

Vignette #2 (The Return to High School: COVID-style Fall 2020 through Spring 2021)

After two months of virtual learning and a summer to process this new normal, teachers received the annual welcome back letter and an email from the district. The communication outlined a five-level “Continuum of Multi-Layered Mitigation Strategies” in response to COVID infection rates. The reality of what this looked like meant everyone was required to wear masks, custodians were responsible for daily sanitation, a planned rotation of students in the building based on the alphabetical ranking of their last names, and believe it or not, seating charts in the cafeteria for high school students. The fear, confusion, and frustrations of students was palpable.

HS Student B: I am only here because my dad said since we’ve been at home, all I do is sleep all day. I don’t know why he be sayin’ dat. I plan on sleepin’ in my next class. [laughs]

HS Student C: Yeah, online learning just doesn’t work for me. I decided to pick up more hours at work since I was at home anyway.

HS Student B: Really? That's a good idea. These teachers be doin' the *most* with all this work.

HS Student C: I heard they can't fail us anyway, so I don't get what's the big deal.

HS Student B: My moms wants me here to eat lunch. She be goin' off about me eatin' all da food at da house.

The above fictionalized conversation relays the sentiments of students' experiences and conversations surrounding what the return to in-person learning looked like during these early days. Serving as high school teachers for many years, we have witnessed a variety of out-of-school factors (Berliner, 2009) impacting our students and their families. The compounding effects of COVID-19, however, have presented countless unfamiliar challenges for our students. When speaking with students, their feelings have changed from heightened concern at the start of the pandemic to feelings of indifference about school and the coinciding responsibilities of being a high school student. Although the U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA) has approved the vaccines for adolescents (Olson et al., 2021), parents normally make this decision for their children. Yet, eligibility to take the vaccine has not affected students' general lack of motivation and engagement in the learning process. Consequently, class participation suffers and it appears that students are more engrossed in their various social media profiles than literacy skill acquisition. Students' current behavior can partially be attributed to the extensive time spent in virtual learning where instruction consisted of abbreviated lessons that took place in various virtual online platforms. The departure from traditional learning has affected both teachers and students, leaving a lasting mark on the impressionable minds of high schoolers.

High school students whose peer relationships and social interactions are vital to their development and mental health, are in a quandary of sorts. While many struggled through virtual learning and welcomed the normalcy of a return to face-to-face classes, they are also wrestling with adjusting to the *business-as-usual* attitude, which is prevalent in our districts. All the while,

classroom teachers are faced with student absences that may run anywhere from a couple of days to several weeks. The disconnection between the reality of living in the time of COVID and teaching has seen students frustrated and lost. We too are at a loss regarding how to handle the ever-changing classroom attendance numbers, the local community response to Center for Disease Control and Prevention (2021) COVID guidance, and simultaneously adhering to the scope and sequence that our districts require. Common assessments, professional learning communities (PLCs), and state mandated testing have returned with a vengeance.

Additionally, the apathy many students exhibit has been coupled with tragedy as they deal with the devastation of COVID-19 and the untimely loss of different family members and friends. For all involved parties, the worry and concern has been tangible as the findings from a survey of two semi-rural Georgia high schools suggest. The results showed that students' worries extended beyond the survey participants themselves and "16% had a family member or close friend who had been infected" by the virus (Gazmararian et al., 2021, p. 358). Throughout the school day, student conversations are filled with topics such as vaccine reliability, mistrust in the government, their interaction with COVID-19, and the constant changes to the mask mandate. As high school teachers, we feel obligated to reflect on these concerns with our students. In turn, students are interested in our perspective and want to discuss the "new normal" that we exist within. Whilst teachers, students, and the community grapple with the realities of the pandemic, we remain confident that we can play a pivotal role in supporting our students. Throughout this pandemic, we have come to understand that unification and empathy are necessary for our individual and collective progress.

College/Higher Institution**Vignette #3 (The Return to College Campus: COVID-style Fall 2020 through Spring 2021)**

Spring and Summer 2020 semesters allowed all faculty to teach online. Yet, as the Fall 2020 semester came near, new “rules” of who would be given permission to teach from home was dependent upon the guidelines given by the CDC.

College Teacher 1: I’m so happy! I was approved to teach from home this year. Since my BMI is technically in the “overweight” category, I’m considered “high-risk” for COVID.

College Teacher 2: Oh really? Just for that? Do you have any underlying health issues?

College Teacher 1: Nope. But I don’t feel comfortable going back to campus, so I applied anyway and now I don’t need to teach in person – even if its hybrid!

College Teacher 2: So, what about people like me? I don’t have any underlying issues and am pretty healthy ... I don’t feel comfortable having to teach in person either. What if I give the virus to my kids or my mom or my grandmother?

College Teacher 1: I don’t know... Unless you have something on that list, I don’t think they’ll allow you to choose...

Never did I think that being a healthy individual would ever be considered a “bad” thing. But during the pandemic, I often found myself wishing that I had some underlying health issue or a high BMI so that I would be given the choice to teach from home. It seemed like an unnecessary risk for me to teach in person when the number of people getting sick and dying from the virus didn’t seem to slow down. What risk was I taking by going to campus multiple times a week? Why was I so afraid as a healthy individual?

From my perspective, it appears the pandemic is an issue of trust – trust in others. As a college-level mathematics instructor, I have seen firsthand how the inconsistent regulations of mask wearing and vaccination mandates have heightened anxieties and uncertainty surrounding COVID-19. While some colleges across the United States have implemented mask and vaccine mandates, my institution has chosen to give students, faculty, and staff the choice to wear a mask or get vaccinated (although both are strongly encouraged). While this may seem like a happy compromise between the two options (mandate or no mandate), giving students, faculty, and staff the “choice” has made people, including myself, nervous about our return to in-person learning. I realized it was because I now had to rely on others to do their part. Trusting people to

do the right thing has been a difficult task, especially when it appears people's thoughts and opinions about what it means to be safe and ethically responsible for the well-being of others do not necessarily match my own.

Many stakeholders including teachers have raised concerns about the mental health and well-being of students as they are forced to wrestle with such dilemmas. As important it is to look at the impact of students' mental health during this time, Correa and First (2021) also acknowledge the effects of crisis on the mental health of school staff. As the number of COVID cases fluctuates and as a faculty member who faces classrooms filled with unmasked students, it was important to me to understand how my students were thinking about this virus and their actions surrounding it.

Although people may assume students who don't wear masks are apathetic and don't care about others, I found that not to be the case. When asked about why they did not wear a mask to school, my students who are young adults gave a variety of responses. Some believe they are immune to the effects of the disease due to their age, previous COVID experiences, vaccination status, and health. Other students don't see a need to wear a mask since they've gotten the vaccine and believe it is enough to protect themselves and others. These beliefs are grounded in the information they have consumed from news outlets and social media (where many indicated to me that that was where they get their news). For those who chose not to get vaccinated, they worry about the effectiveness and safety of the vaccine (many stating it took a long time for FDA approval). With the information provided, students have valid reasons for making their choices and are making their own judgments about whether they need to wear a mask or get vaccinated.

Yet, for those who continue to wear masks on campus, seeing other people choosing to go maskless has created a sense of fear and uncertainty for me as an instructor and for some

students. While all students remain respectful towards their peers in class, many students have spoken to me individually about their fears. Similar to [first and second authors]' high school experiences, students on my college campus have conversations centered around family and loss, worry for the safety of others, and the increased demands to make the “right” choices. As each new wave of COVID emerges, these feelings of anxiety, fear, and anger persist.

Having these types of conversations with my students have helped me acknowledge my own thoughts and worries about COVID-19, mask wearing, vaccinations, and the larger societal issues that have come to light. As an Asian American woman, I have generally felt comfortable living in the United States. However, the spread of the virus has sparked racism and hate toward Asian communities (He et al., 2021) – myself included. Not only have I been concerned about my health and the health of my family, but I’ve also had to worry about our safety. I am not alone in having these types of concerns - issues of racism and health have come up multiple times in conversations with students.

Much like many of my students, I have felt the tremendous pressure of the pandemic. This pressure has materialized through my teaching, time spent with my children and loved ones, and the diverse dialogue with people whose views and opinions differ from my own. As an educator, I believe I have the responsibility to understand my students, empathize with them, and engage in conversations that might make me feel uncomfortable. It also requires me to trust my students - trust that they will take information that is available, think critically about it, and make the best choice to ensure the safety of themselves and others.

How Do We Respond as Educators and Instill Hope Amidst Pessimism and Doubt?

Vignette #4 (Current Conditions of COVID: Fall 2021-Spring 2022)

- HS Teacher 1:** I've noticed an increased sense of apathy in my students. It's as if they're still mentally at home, and we're fighting an uphill battle to get them re-engaged in learning.
- College Teacher:** I'm feeling the same thing, yet, I wonder if it's apathy or just the learning experience students are having in these new virtual environments. Many students, for instance, have indicated to me that they want to be at school but taking a class at home (online) is just easier and safer.
- HS Teacher 2:** I understand. Our district offered students a choice of in-person learning or virtual learning for those who still did not feel comfortable returning to the building.
- HS Teacher 1:** Same here. My students have so many missing assignments in the gradebook, but I keep trying to motivate them as we're coming out of this fog. I have changed the way I grade and what I grade to accommodate my students. The school is also trying to balance a sense of normalcy through activities such as football games, prom, and the senior trip.
- College Teacher:** Right. It's so confusing. At our institution, we are treating it as if everything is back to normal - masks are optional, we're back in person,
- HS Teacher 2:** The problem is things are *not* normal, and they likely will never be quite the same again!

Recognizing how our students have responded to this pandemic was just the beginning of us recognizing this new normal. As we continued to share our experiences with each other, we realized that even in a time of great uncertainty, we can still choose how we respond and not fall prey to the negativity surrounding us. How we react and respond to those who think differently from us sets the tone for the types of conversations we will have with others. Our students look to us as the *adults in the room* and temper their response based on our own. If we seem frenzied or worried, they may internalize those feelings. We have found that being honest with our students and admitting when we don't have *all* the answers is best for everyone. We also have found that being a listening board for students has helped ease some of their anxieties surrounding the virus as well as our own. Small gestures such as these can offer students a haven amid the chaos and potentially mitigate the social and personal stressors which the pandemic has exacerbated.

Understanding the Self

We situate our conceptual framework of self-understanding and empathizing with the experiences of our students through the sociocultural learning theory. Within this framework, learning is not connected to a uniformed practice, but involves the interactions that students have with the world around them. Students' socialization directly impacts how they learn, what they learn, and the ways instructors validate the lived experiences of *all* students. To further emphasize the strength of sociocultural learning theory, we highlight Yosso's (2005) ideology. She posits that we all possess "community cultural wealth" that is defined by "an array of knowledge, skills, abilities and contacts possessed and utilized by Communities of Color to survive and resist macro and microforms of oppression" (p. 77). As we incorporate the diverse cultural experiences of our students and ourselves into daily discourse and instruction, we validate and honor our unique individuality, identity, and representations in the world.

With the goal of upholding individuality and identity in mind, we proactively reflect upon our own criticality; our own self. Criticality, as we define it, is based on our experiences and how we situate ourselves within them. It requires us to recall memories and moments and understand the *significance* of them. Why, for instance, do we remember some experiences but not others? Why do we evoke powerful emotions whenever we talk about a specific topic? A critical understanding of self means we must understand and appreciate the cultures, biases/prejudices, and perspectives of others (Junor Clarke, 2014). Incidents that provoke criticality often revolve around race, gender, language, and culture. Yet, in the time of COVID-19, we have also seen how choosing whether or not to wear a mask, and to get the vaccine or not has now become deeply politicized. However, we contend that as critical educators, we see the importance of encouraging our students to question, speak truth to power, and empathize with those who are

marginalized. Thus, developing critical consciousness means being aware of your role in society, including the advantages you have over another person or group of people because you belong to a dominant, powerful group. Understanding power relations in the field of education has provided a space to talk about why all of our voices matter. This requires an intense amount of self-reflection, both on the individual level and collectively.

Understanding Others

The pandemic has highlighted the inherent inequities in the world at-large and more specifically in the smaller microcosms in which we exist – high schools and college campuses. Our reflections as narrated in this essay are a result of our own criticality. Even so, we do not want our critical perspectives to stop with us; we have a duty to invite our students to do the same even if it makes us feel uncomfortable. These types of conversations cannot be avoided with students who are witnessing these political debates surrounding masks, vaccines, and race as they leave the school building and step into society.

Educators have a tremendous responsibility in providing opportunities for students to think critically about themselves and the world around them. Curriculum in K-16 should focus on how to help students develop their own voice and help them acknowledge that they are vehicles for change. William-White (2013) states curriculum is reflexive and is “product, process, and praxis – shaped by cultural, social, and political forces” (p. 4). We can encourage students to question what they consider as the “norm.” In Cha’s (2013) study, for instance, he questioned the power relationships and decisions made by adults and men in the Hmong culture. While he understood that it is a part of the culture (and his own history), he engaged students in discussions and taught them to question why some cultural practices continue. Just as we continue to see inequities in our own society, we have the moral obligation to not only address

those inequities, but to also enact change for the greater good. We “must allow for deep inquiry, exploration, meaning-making, and innovation” (William-White, 2013, p. 4). This may require students and teachers alike to find themselves in an uncomfortable space as they figure out their own biases and privileges and how they appear in their daily lives. In other words, how we synthesize and negotiate ourselves within these experiences creates the inception of criticality (Muccular, 2013).

Given the increasing amount of technology and access to information on the web, students are required to sift through all forms of media to gain access to the “facts.” It is crucial that educators teach students how to navigate this world while also being critical thinkers. As mentioned earlier, students are concerned about vaccine reliability, new variants of COVID-19, and gaining general information that they can trust and rely on about the pandemic. Critical literacy, then, becomes a method of how we can help students navigate the world. When our students come to us to talk about their concerns and feelings, they “should be encouraged to express their own voice and to challenge hegemonic power relations” (Tenery, 2005, p. 128). Our classrooms should be an environment that supports active and open dialogue, and in turn, strengthens criticality for each member. Otherwise, we are not making an honest attempt to see things from their vantage point, nor are we providing them a space to discuss the massive amounts of information with which they are inundated.

Considering the climate of the country, it is necessary to incorporate sociocultural based theories of learning (Snow, 1994; Vygotsky, 1978) into lessons and activities that cultivate positive relationships and infuse relevant discourse in the classroom. The learning environment is a space where teachers and students should be able to learn from each other and be comfortable with vulnerable moments, such as when loved ones are hospitalized or have

succumbed due to COVID complications. Through transparent discussions, we talk about our feelings in the midst of the world's circumstances. In *Teaching Critical Thinking*, hooks (2010) addresses the necessity for teachers to tap into students' interests. hooks states,

In the engaged classroom students learn the value of speaking and of dialogue, and they also learn to speak when they have something meaningful to contribute. Understanding that every student has a valuable contribution to offer to a learning community means that we honor all capabilities (p. 22).

We as a classroom community are able to empathize with each other in this time of crisis. As we gain a deeper understanding of their concerns, and by sharing our own concerns, there has been a mutual exchange of trust and undeniable bonds are formed.

Finally, empathy needs to be a focus in schools. If we cannot empathize with others, how can we begin to make changes to better the world? Students and educators need time to connect with their emotions and inner selves. Through such a stance, we engender a sense of hope within the lives of our students, ourselves, and the community at-large. Considering the emotional, financial, and human toll of the pandemic, it is vital that we remain hopeful.

Concluding Thoughts

Yes, it can seem daunting to teach during a time of high-stress and uncertainty. Yet, there is a greater responsibility in all of us. This responsibility entails creating a world in which people feel comfortable discussing the issues they endure and finding hope to speak against those issues. Additionally, as educators, we understand the privileged position we hold; this distinction can occasionally create detachment and separation from the students we teach. However, as we transition back into the classroom, we have made concerted efforts to enrich this environment

and instill positivity amidst pessimism by including our students' experiences and "cultural wealth" (Yosso, 2005) as a focal point for critical teaching and learning.

At all levels of education, we must actively be aware of our participation in the conversations and dialogues that surround us. Critical reflection is "on-going and one that elicits and requires reflection" (Albers, 2014, p. 2). Once you become aware of your participation in maintaining the inequities of society, it becomes easier to acknowledge ways to contest it, and decrease participation in actions that separate and isolate diverse groups of people. By sharing our stories, we hope others will recognize they are not alone, and we can all help each other move forward with a sense of optimism and hope.

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Author Bio: Brooks J. Salter is a high school special education teacher with a content focus in English. Brooks is also a doctoral candidate at Georgia State University in the Teaching and Learning program. Brooks has over 10 years of teaching experience and currently teaches in the Metro Atlanta area. Brooks' research interests are focused on creating critical literacy writing opportunities for impact and change, specifically for underserved Black high school students.

Author Bio: Cheryll Thompson-Smith is a high school English educator in the Metro Atlanta area. Cheryll currently teaches Advanced Placement English literature and British Literature and has over 26 years of classroom teaching experience. Her current research interests include African American teachers' cultural identities as they relate to the literary canon and leveraging their heritage knowledge to #disrupttexts within the traditionally Eurocentric curriculum.