Centering Equity, Social Justice, and Holistic Educative Dispositions in a Post-COVID Schoolhouse

by T. Jameson Brewer, University of North Georgia

The COVID-19 pandemic that ravaged normalcy across the globe brought with it lingering health issues for some survivors,[1] devastated domestic and global markets and economies, caused unprecedented unemployment in the United States,[2] and shuttered the nation's schools. Many K-12 school districts sent students home under what were then temporary measures to social distance, yet physical schools remained closed for months and learning remained online for the rest of the academic year. While the shift to online prompted questions surrounding testing, equitable access,[3] and the academic trajectories of students for the return to traditional schooling, moving public education to an online, at-home, setting brought a magnifying glass onto the socioeconomic disparities throughout the United States and how they have long been manifested and exacerbated in our nation's schools.[4]

Misguided Historical Reforms: Individualization, Marketization, and Standardization

One of the most notable debates related to inequality in schools is the overarching and historical battle of equality of opportunity versus equality of outcomes.[5] Education reforms over the past few decades have focused primarily on outcomes, centering privatization, standardization, and punitive accountability measures to accomplish these goals. This reflects a desire to reimagine schools as a private individualized commodity in the service of making students "college and career ready" so that they can, individually, escape inequity rather than an intentional focus on the glaring disparities of educational opportunities. To this end, much focus has been placed on working towards equalizing and increasing educational outputs under the assumption that the primary ingredients of an American "rags-to-riches" story—grit, determination, and increased test scores—enable students to escape generational poverty and, simultaneously, their own communities.

This approach of 'commodifying' education has fostered questionable policies and practices that dehumanize the educative process and all involved.[6] Education in this myopic view is a

passive exchange of information that reinforces societal beliefs in meritocracy and "pulling yourself up by your own bootstraps" which have long led to the reproduction and reinforcement of a generational economic, racial, and societal divide.[7] This logic assumes students who fail to improve test scores lack "grit," despite grit being a covert method for perpetuating racial stereotypes.[8] Similarly, teachers failing to increase student standardized test scores each year despite representing a new cadre of students have their professional commitment questioned and their financial livelihoods challenged to the point where teachers are leaving the profession at an alarming rate.[9]

These approaches dismiss decades of academic literature showing the profound impact that factors like student poverty can have on informing academic outcomes and instead position these realities as excuses, overlooking and dismissing systemic societal inequalities. We have known for more than half a century that one of the strongest predictors of academic outcomes is a family's socioeconomic status and the resources wealth, or lack of it, can bring in the case of relative poverty.[10] Yet, in the accountability landscape, with its historical roots in a post-Sputnik era and accelerated following the release of A Nation at Risk,[11] the primary, broad focus of schools has been to equalize student outcomes as measured on tests while ignoring, overlooking, and dismissing the inequitable societal and educational realities that many students face. This has led to many attempts to treat symptoms rather than underlying issues that have led, in many ways, to solutions in search of problems. Rather than understanding variance as a result of inequity, differences in student outcomes are attributed to a 'failed' public school system and 'bad' teachers.[12] The solution, then, is more standardization for accountability and privatization of the public system. The push towards privatization, marketization, and standardization of public schools has been accelerated through disaster capitalism as the prescribed solution to the crisis is individualization and marketization. Understood this way, the care of public school students ceases to be understood as a public obligation and, rather, as a private good and miscarriages of social justice are understood as the result of poor choices or poor work habits by individuals rather than reflective of larger systemic inequity.

An Opportunity for the Common Good and Systemic Change

Arguably, the COVID-19 pandemic has offered us the opportunity to reevaluate the level of importance we place on trivial endeavors and instead focus on our shared humanity and commitment to one another. Schools have long focused on reforming themselves to become the very best at testing, standardization, commodification, and quantification for comparison while minimizing the humanity of students and ignoring glaring social justice inequalities that are exposed, and reinforced, by our approach to schooling. In this way, schools have long sought to become the very best at what has decidedly become the very worst in how we approach education.

When we return to our schoolhouses we ought not return with the same mindsets and practices that have for decades reinforced and reproduced structural racial and class injustices

and inequalities. We have before us an unparalleled opportunity to manifest the changes in our schools that decenter the importance of testing and rigid accountability for teachers and students and actually center the needs of students. Our students require the opportunity for their needs to be met both outside and inside of schools, and striving to increase some arbitrary test score number is hardly the route towards achieving either of those aims.

As universities begin to move away from standardized testing for its documented disadvantages to non-White and non-affluent students, [13] K-12 schools across the country have the opportunity now to follow in the footsteps of teachers at Garfield High School that, en masse, refused to administer a state mandated standardized test.[14] Accountability is important but it can be organic rather than contractual and removing testing is a fundamental component.[15] Any benefits of high-stakes standardized testing simply do not outweigh the negative consequences of instructional time loss, debilitating school cultures, and teaching-to-the-test pedagogy.

Our historical efforts to ameliorate systemic poverty and racial inequalities through individualism and by raising test scores can, and should, be completely abandoned for the pursuit of ensuring that students have equitable educative opportunities. Social justice cannot be bound up within the schoolhouse walls; it requires a comprehensive approach to broad domestic policies that elevate the importance of our shared humanity and obligation to one another. In this post-COVID world, we must center equity and social justice if we are to ever fully realize the power and potential of the democratic cornerstone that is the public schoolhouse.

T. Jameson Brewer is an assistant professor of social foundations of education at the University of North Georgia.

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