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Defining Our Future in Uncertain Times

F. Todd Goodson

This issue of *Educational Considerations* brings together an exciting blend of original research, bibliographic essays, and argued scholarship. Taken as a whole, this group of manuscripts speaks to the wide range of interests across our profession representing several current issues of importance to us all.

I cannot help but think our profession—the larger world of teachers, administrators, teacher educators, scholars, and researchers—is at a critical point. The global pandemic disrupted our practices in ways we are only now beginning to understand, and as we emerge from our collective isolation, we are confronting the professional (and personal) trauma inflicted by the virus. Our systems and our practices will never be quite the same.

One of the challenges we have in attempting to map the impact of COVID is that all of our experiences are unique. We have now a population within which everyone experienced significant disruptions, but the nature of those disruptions was dictated by our personal life circumstances during the pandemic. One child missed kindergarten and first grade, for example, and the impact of missing that critical period of learning will be felt throughout that person's lifetime. By contrast, an adolescent missed high school activities, maybe prom and graduation. Those missed rites-of-passage events can never be reclaimed. Many young adults had undergraduate experiences altered in unexpected ways. Those who were teaching through the COVID years will have that “pivot” moment as a badge of honor and trauma forever. Some parents suddenly found themselves acting as homeschoolers. Across the globe, countless people experienced financial hardships.

My point is that while we share the experience of disruption, the nature of those disruptive experiences was deeply personal and driven by individual life circumstances. We have now three full generations with missing time, lost moments and opportunities related to where we each happened to be in the life cycle when the pandemic exploded across the world. It was an event we always knew was possible, but I suspect most of us never really believed it would happen.

And yet it happened.

We also must acknowledge that a startling number of people are no longer with us as a result of the virus, and the contributions they should have made for our larger communities will never be replaced. The wounds caused by their untimely absence will be felt for decades.

Now we are in the process of picking up the pieces and moving forward from where we are in this new, post-COVID space. Increasingly, I sense from my professional networks and communities a growing sense that we are on the edge of significant change. We cannot just pretend it did not happen and go back to where we were in 2020. We can say our ancestors lived this experience in the wake of the Spanish flu early in the 20th century, but the world was a very different place in those days. No one left a road map for us to know which turns to take, when to slow down, when to accelerate through the days and months ahead.

It could also be argued that change is inevitable, as our systems and our processes strain under unprecedented stressors. Our political systems and our professional structures are under threat, but a powerful level of toxicity also surrounds our personal networks and even our physical existence. So the question of the moment is whether we are facing a crisis point or a moment of unprecedented opportunity. I would like to suggest we are not powerless in this regard, that we can define the present moment according to our own terms.

In graduate school many years ago I encountered Speech Act Theory (e.g., Austin, Searle), and while that body of work never really influenced practice across professional boundaries much beyond philosophy and linguistics, I have returned to its central concepts through the years, and I have often thought there is much more that could be done with, for example, the notion of performative utterances in education. To oversimplify, I suspect we speak the world into existence much more than we realize, and to oversimplify even more, we know teachers who tell students they are capable get better learning that teaches who let students know they are incapable learners.

What we say matters.

At this point in our collective history, I choose to say our future is bright, that we are standing at the proverbial fork in the road with the power to select a vision of teaching and learning that brings our work to the forefront of our global community. Bailey Mahoney's manuscript in this issue maps several key themes she found in her research into the impact of COVID on classroom teachers' experiences. Her research arrives at that point where teachers found growth in the midst of challenge.

I suggest we can use her research to guide our larger journey unfolding before us. Mahoney notes, "Teachers had to adapt, learn new technologies, and rise to many challenges facing them on a daily basis." That, I submit, is a powerful performative utterance. We can look to the future and see danger or we can see opportunity. If we refuse to accept defeat, we keep open the potential for ultimate victory. More than ever, we need to stand collectively in the face of uncertainty and even hostility and refuse to acknowledge defeat.

References

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