

PANDEMICS, SCHOLARSHIP, AND RETHINKING WHAT COUNTS

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By now, many of us have readjusted to a new and sadly, a more painful normal. The pandemic left all of us with various scars and lingering emotions. We long hours working in less-than-ideal circumstances at home (especially those working parents who did remote learning while also supporting their children during Zoom classes). We celebrated the first day of kindergarten, graduation, and ceremonies online. We also lost friends and family to the disease. We had socially distanced funerals where we sobbed through masks, unable to grieve and comfort each other. We watched healthcare workers tirelessly go into extreme conditions and beg the world to act with more caution and care towards each other with a highly transmissible disease, only to see so many not take this advice and eventually end up in their hospitals. Many of us had delayed surgeries or medical care. Thousands of workers in the service industry lost their jobs only to find the *same industry* complain that they cannot find enough workers who will come back for less than a living wage and no health benefits. How is any of this humane? We as teachers and teacher educators are not here unscathed as well.

Nearly all of us had to learn quickly about remote learning, even though this went against the core of our teaching philosophies that learning happens in community and in person. For caregivers, they conducted classes on Zoom while helping their children learn remotely, even when learning online was foreign and impersonal. For those who do not have kids, we also faced a crush of increasing workload behind the scenes and added responsibilities as everyone else did. Universities responded by giving early career, tenure-track scholars a pause on their tenure clock to account for the delay in their research and productivity. #ThanksIGuess? Holding each other with grace and humility was a constant battle, even during stressful times, to remember both for ourselves and each other.

But what happens when the university or college calls the “pandemic over” and things should go back to “normal?” Do these struggles and constraints go away just because we can go back to in-person learning? No. The pandemic just illuminated them and made them bigger, more upfront, and more pressing to address. #TheMythOfLearningLoss is creeping into the common language we hear from districts and administration in K-12. Does it mean that schools and districts will welcome researchers back with open arms to engage in scholarship with teachers, children, and families? No. Our work is not the center of their universe (nor should be). Does it mean that suddenly tenure expectations will become more reasonable given a universities’ resources, infrastructure, and mission to support and sustain high-intensive research organization? No. What incentive does the university have in doing this?

My provocation begins with a simple question reminiscent of Ball and Forzani’s 2007 lecture “What makes educational research “educational”?” What does research look like from here on out? How can we reimagine what “counts” as educational research based on our experiences during the pandemic? What can be said of scholarship in the time of caregiving that values our work and does not dismiss it because it is not “a solo author journal article in a top tier journal?” Is that the ONLY work we want to value?

When *Democracy and Education* journal published my interpretation of how I used the Torres’ Rights of the Learner with teacher candidates at UTSA, I had mixed feelings because I

was not sure if it would have counted for my tenure dossier as a “quality publication.” The journal was not JRME. Or JMTE. *Democracy and Education* did not have impact factors or acceptance rates that I could cite in my dossier. But since 2017, I have heard from so many teachers who have been moved by Torres’ ideas and how I framed them as a form of divergent formative assessment, that it has been overwhelming. On Twitter, I can see how teachers and other teacher educators can push through their assumptions and elevate children’s ideas, voices, and thoughts, without children having to first defend their legitimacy. If I were at another institution, my tenure committee likely would have dismissed that publication and others, without ever considering the content or impact of the work.

Can the work of our colleagues who organize communities also be a part of the valued scholarship field? Can the work of our colleagues who lead protests and create legislative change be valued and elevated as worthy scholarship? Can the work of colleagues who draft ethnic studies standards (especially in states and districts that fear the phrases “Critical race theory” and “colonialism” in Pk-20 classrooms) be a source of valued scholarship? Cathery Yeh, Melissa Corral, Nicole Joseph, and many others should remind us as to how we can create and enact our scholarship in ways that show demonstrable change, especially work that moves and lives beyond our echo chambers in the academe. How can we as a collective begin to advocate for and with each other to reimagine what educational scholarship looks like?

The pandemic is not over and nor can we completely erase the scars left from its impact. But we do have a choice. We can decide to **pivot** as a community to a new vision for what is valued by returning to the humanity of our field, our communities, and our passions. We can also learn to operate in a “new number system for scholarship”: reimagine “what counts” as scholarship without simply relying and reifying on traditional models that advanced the careers of some (primarily white scholars), but not nearly all.

For example, we can emphasize and value more teacher-researcher lines of inquiry. Highlight the work of self-study and how this can push us to a more normalized conversation of “what can I do better in my practice through praxis to examine aspects of it?” Emphasize more work that explicitly integrates teaching, research, and service, especially labor that does more than bolster a first author’s CV. Find ways to involve full-time faculty like adjuncts and clinical professors of practice and students at all levels (undergrad, grad, doctoral) in research activities... and pay them to do this work. Name and dismantle systems and structures that marginalize, push, and stereotype the scholarship of BIPOC, LGBTQIA, and caregiver scholars... so much that they leave the profession altogether. It is up to the collective to decide what our new normal is going to look like. We shouldn’t leave it up to a rubric, committee, or administration.

I invite each of us to take up this question: What do we want the new normal for what “counts” as mathematics educational research to look like? How can we make it more humane and more inclusive for the next generation of mathematics education researchers?

References

- Ball, D. L., & Forzani, F. M. (2007). What makes education research "educational?" *Educational Researcher*, 36(9), 529–540. <https://doi.org/10.3102/0013189X07312896>