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Dual Pandemics: How a Global Health Crisis Exposed Educational Inequity to White, Middle-Class America

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Dual Pandemics

How a Global Health Crisis Exposed Educational Inequity to White, Middle-Class America

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Abstract

This opinion piece explores the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on exposing educational inequity. The historically racist and discriminatory practices related to both academic instruction and discipline are long-standing in the history of American education, but have been brought to the attention of White, middle-class America as a result of the global health crisis. Specific strategies are presented as initial steps in simultaneously embedding anti-racism and addressing discriminatory policies in every American classroom, specifically related to students of color and disabled students.

Introduction

Years into the COVID-19 pandemic, the education field has adapted to a "new normal" in the interest of public health, which has inadvertently exposed another pandemic that has plagued this nation for decades: educational inequity. It is not a new phenomenon that students of color and disabled students are academically behind their White and neurotypical peers (Gregory et al., 2010); it is not breaking news that our most vulnerable students are performing the worst (Berlak, 2008). However, COVID has exposed problems with our education system that have existed for decades in glaringly obvious ways. Systemically racist and discriminatory policies and practices are landmarks of the American education system, yet alarms are going off in the homes of White America (Jones, 2021; Pak, 2021).

For those just now becoming concerned about education, I can't help but

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point out the privilege in their feigned concern—the privilege of just now growing concerned about students' academic and developmental progress. These concerns have existed for decades in the homes of students of color and disabled students (Johnson, 2021; Pak, 2021) but have become more mainstream as they have creeped in the homes of White, middle-class families. We have seen news articles and social media posts panicking over children's academic struggles. While the alarms have been (largely) valid (Pinar, 2021), they are ripe with privilege—the privilege to think the American education system is fine because it's not affecting us negatively, or that problems faced by historically marginalized groups are invalid because the American pull-yourself-up-from-your-bootstraps dream is clearly alive and well. Well, due to forced homeschooling and the resulting learning loss, White, middle-class American households have struggled to keep their bootstraps up. Suddenly, the alarms are ringing, and concerns are raised all over the country about our public education system. The problem didn't exist before it affected them personally—a problem dripping with privilege.

For students of color, the education system has been problematic for centuries due to historically and systemically racist policies and practices that impede their progress. From zero-tolerance policies and discriminatory dress codes to whitewashed curriculum and over-disciplining, students of color (and disabled students) have been treated unjustly and inequitably for centuries in our nation's schools (Sarfo-Mensah, 2020).

COVID Pandemic Implications

I read a post on social media about a student who shows up to every Zoom class holding his infant brother and often leaves class to warm bottles and change diapers. I read a news story about a family without access to the Internet spending every day outside the public library to attend virtual school. They are not heartwarming, cutesy examples of resilience, and don't even get me started on "grit." They tell the real-life stories of how real people live outside the lines of White, middle-class America. We already know our kids are resilient, but survival tactics are not sweet and heartwarming.

Stories of loss have been all over the news during the pandemic; so much so that we have become desensitized to the amount of people nationwide who have experienced food insecurity, unstable housing, and lack of healthcare as a result of the COVID pandemic (Jones, 2021). Let's not forget the impact on our collective and individual mental health. Many experts have described the disproportionate impact of COVID-19 on people of color, which simultaneously exposes systemic issues related to access to healthcare and safe housing. Middle and upper-class families do not worry if they will have access to Wi-Fi for Zoom class, or if their child will learn anything through the screen; they hire a virtual tutor or sign up for in-person learning pods. While this may not necessarily be

enough for students to land on the Honor Roll, they are certainly getting by with fewer obstacles.

For students with special educational requirements, their families likely do not have the training needed to adapt curriculum and make academic content accessible based on their unique needs. We cannot expect parents of neurodivergent children to know how to modify general education curriculum, or parents of students with emotional/behavior disorders to implement a data-driven behavior intervention. These expectations are fair and reasonable given the pandemic circumstances, but the results will be long-lasting in the classroom (Hurwitz et al., 2022).

Finding Solutions

There is certainly no vaccine for systemically racist policies, and there is certainly not a cure for systemic racism via mandatory diversity trainings telling us we are all different but all beautiful in our own way. Here's another newsflash: the education system overhaul will not happen with a cutesy clipart image of children of diverse skin tones holding hands around the globe.

The vaccine will come in the form of a complete curriculum overhaul to include and uplift BIPOC voices and figures in all academic subjects, as well as the unlearning of problematic behavior management practices (looking at you, publicly displayed behavior charts). The cure will come in the form of removing police from school and replacing them with school counselors, social workers, and mental health professionals (Jones, 2021). Our students need BIPOC teachers and administrators, and validating, socially relevant behavior interventions—not a Black History Month craft and a blurb in a newsletter. They need teachers who don't clutch their handbags when they walk into their neighborhoods, or teachers who continue to mispronounce their names because there are too many syllables (Morton et al., 2020). They need trauma-informed education and a space to navigate their feelings without missing out on recess time. Our students deserve the best we can give them, because that is what White, middle-class America gets without anyone even asking. So, now a deep-seeded issue has become more well-known, schools are open again, and learning recovery is a top priority. The question is, then: what are we doing about it? What are *you* doing about it?

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