

# Imagined and Unimagined Spaces: Teaching within the Triple Pandemic

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## Abstract

*This article surfaces the functions, possibilities, and problems that emerged during the triple pandemic for a public school teacher in an urban school. The author weaves research, narrative, autoethnographic excerpts and timeline to represent the imagined and unimagined spaces that she and her students occupied from 2019 to 2020. How the teacher and students occupied and narrated those spaces tells a story that can be compared and contrasted with the dominant narrative of “pandemic learning loss” found in media and public discourse. These moments highlight two lines of inquiry: What imagined and unimagined spaces emerged as a result of large scale disruption? And what conditions, dispositions, and resources are needed from public education for our interdependent, unimagined future? The conclusion suggests that due to perceptual and holographic variations between stakeholders, the way forward will require collaborative effort.*

**Keywords:** triple pandemic, teachers, ESL, cultural resilience, culturally responsive practice, learning loss

## Describing the External and Internal Scene



(Harper, 2020)

As a public school teacher, context matters. I am a middle-aged white woman in K-12 education, which I have seen described as a middle class, White-racialized, and female space (Milne, 2016). The statistics on teacher demographics bear out this description. The most recent federal teacher data collection effort (2017-2018) shows that 76% of teachers are female, 79% of teachers are White, and with an average base salary of \$42,800, teachers are middle class (National Center for Education Statistics, 2022). Everything about school, from the curriculum and classroom arrangement, to the behavior policies and rigid time management, has been designed according to the standards and specifications of people who look like me. I should feel comfortable here, and yet, I do not. When schooling was flipped to virtual due to COVID in March 2020, I was shocked, then excited: How might these conditions of disruption impact the structure and function of schools? What possibilities and problems would emerge? This article surfaces the functions, possibilities, and problems that emerged during the triple pandemic for a public school teacher in an urban school.

In setting the context for this publication, the editors have specific intentions when referring to the triple pandemic. “Climate” is the environmental and atmospheric conditions that are producing extreme weather events with increasing frequency and devastating effects on a global scale. “COVID” refers to the SARs COVID-19 virus and its mutations during this episode of global transmission. “Inequality” references many different conditions of social life. Presently in the United States, inequality has particular connotations of systemic racism. My profession and training as an English as a New Language teacher makes me particularly sensitive to inequalities related to race, culture, language, and citizenship status.

“Climate” in the context of public schools is related to the internal environment of a school community, which is shaped by the adults who work there. In regard to climate considerations, I have found diversity, equity, and inclusion training (DEI) to be beneficial. Diversity training can be defined as any program designed to empower its participants to facilitate positive interaction, shape instructional methods, reduce prejudice and discrimination, and generally teach dissimilar others how to work together effectively (Banks, 2005; Bezrukova, Jehn & Spell, 2012). Multiple authors contend that diversity training is the most significant and necessary component of teacher preparation, given that there is often a racial/cultural/linguistic mismatch between teachers and students (Yuan, 2017).

In a spring 2020 diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) training, participants in my virtual breakout group were invited to consider and name the spaces in our schools in which we tend not see groups of Black, Brown, and Indigenous students. Colleagues were able to call out some spaces that have been and remain dominated by White students—like advanced placement classes at the high school level, and “advanced learner” (gifted) programs in elementary schools. In truth, the educational attainment rates of Black, Brown, and Indigenous students (as student groups, not individuals) in our district were and are such that a long list could be made. When our breakout room internal timers were up and we were zoomed back to the large group, the facilitator asked individuals to share some of the spaces that had surfaced in our conversations.

I unmuted and then re-muted myself. The facilitator saw this, and invited me to speak. I immediately thought, *“How can I say what I want to say here? We have had this conversation many times, and after a while, the conversation grows hollow, because while we see it and say it, action to address these access issues is slow, uneven and sporadically attempted?”* I started slowly, “I think we know and can identify what spaces are largely not occupied by Black and Brown students, and I hear and see my colleagues calling some of those spaces out. What I am

more interested in are the unimagined spaces that my students occupy, the ways in which they occupy them, and I think those spaces bear consideration.”

“For instance, right now we are operating in distance learning. There are students who are opting to participate in expected ways in distance learning, meaning, they are physically present at the assigned times for classes and groups, in the assigned virtual spaces. There are other students, who are creatively constructing their own daily school schedule based on their interests—who perhaps don’t come to reading groups, or the math lesson, but attend morning meetings and specialists daily. There are still other students who participate asynchronously—who do the work that is required but aren’t attending or are rarely attending classes, on the terms we constructed for them. I think there are opportunities here to create more responsive options if we are willing to consider the implications of this feedback.”

I use narrative, autoethnographic excerpts and timeline to represent the imagined and unimagined spaces that my students and I occupied during the height of the triple pandemic (2019-2020). How my students, colleagues, and I occupied and narrated those spaces tells a story that can be compared and contrasted with the dominant narrative of “pandemic learning loss” found in media and public discourse. These moments cause me to ponder two questions: What imagined and unimagined spaces emerged as a result of large scale disruption? And what conditions, dispositions, and resources are needed to equip schools, families, and students for our interdependent, unimagined future?

### **Describing the Scene: Literature and Methods**

My proximity to the internal workings of classrooms gives me intimate glimpses of the intersections of imagination, perception, and possibility. The internal, anecdotal statistics of my school district are not discrepant from broader statistics, according to Great Lakes Equity Center (2020). Black/Brown/Indigenous students who attend schools with a majority of Black/Brown/Indigenous students are less likely to have access to advanced courses and talent-based academic programs than students in schools serving mostly White populations. The state in which I work is majority White, so the programs are present; and yet Black/Brown/Indigenous students are under-represented in these programs.

Black/Brown/Indigenous students attending schools located in dis-invested communities are less likely to receive instruction or class work that addresses grade appropriate standards, reflects higher-level cognitive demand (e.g., Bloom’s taxonomy (Bloom, 1956), Webb’s Depth Of Knowledge (Webb, 2002), or Marzano’s taxonomy (Marzano, 2007)), or that is meaningfully engaging and relevant. Meanwhile, Black/Brown/Indigenous students are over-represented in documented behavior statistics, especially referrals and in-school/out-of-school suspensions.

What might these statistics of institutionalized low expectations and criminalization of behavior be attributed to, according to the literature? These circumstances are described as by-products of the “White spaces” which permeate schools (Milne, 2013). Singleton (2006) describes the role and presence of Whiteness as something that lives beyond individual White bodies, commanding space and setting parameters of acceptability in social, institutional, and personal spaces. In schools, Whiteness perpetuates through racialized deficit thinking, group stereotyping, inequitable funding, and biased disciplinary practices (Matias, et al., 2014).

Consider that the majority of teachers nationally are White (National Center for Education Statistics, 2022), and that the design of public schools did not originally accommodate diversity of race, socioeconomic status, or ability. These factors contribute to the persistence of racially and

culturally oppressive structures in schools (Khalifa, 2019). What this means to me as a practitioner is that oppressive structures, not students, are the root cause of the distress and dissonance that I and other participants experience.

My entry into K-12 teaching in 2006 coincided with an emergence of equity professional development as a means of mitigating, if not transforming, climate conditions within schools. Over the course of my career, I have trained with the following organizations and individuals, who continue to influence my thinking and practices:

- National Urban Alliance (Yvette Jackson)
- Pacific Education Group: Beyond Diversity (Glen Singleton)
- Mindful Facilitation (Lee Mun Wah)
- E3: Education, Excellence and Equity (JuanCarlos Arauz)
- Ready for Rigor Framework (Zaretta Hammond)

The training I received has impressed on me that it is my obligation to interrogate my own thinking and practices alongside challenging the structures and practices of the schools/districts I serve. In the course of my studies with Pacific Education Group, I remember a presenter saying that the struggle for educational equity is like a moving walkway; I am only contributing to the pursuit of equity to the extent that I am intentionally walking against the direction that the walkway is moving.

The caveat I issue in advance is that the following is autoethnography, a narrative woven from theory, the research of others, and my lived experiences. As Chang (2016) warns, "...telling one's story does not automatically result in cultural understanding of self and others, which only grows out of in-depth cultural analysis and interpretation" (p. 13). I can only hope to accomplish some of this analysis and interpretation. I invite you, the reader, to continue this endeavor.

### **Lunch Land: Control in Public School Spaces**

*[September, 2019-March 6, 2020, Monday-Friday, 12:05pm-12:35pm]*

Physically, there are a limited number of spaces in schools where students are able to control their presence and timing by opting in or opting out. Before the pandemic lockdown, I had lunch duty during middle school lunch. In a standard middle school, lunches might occur according to grade level, but in the K-8 building in which I taught, all the middle grades had lunch from 12:05 pm-12:35 pm. In order to limit unauthorized gatherings, fights, and/or disruptions to other classes, students had to sign in and out to leave the lunchroom, with two students allowed out at any one time. Students were not free to wander during this time; they could sign out to go to the bathroom or the nurse. If they got a hall pass from a teacher, they could come to the cafeteria, pick up their lunch, and go to the teacher's classroom. This alternate space was designated for privileged few, because it required the classroom teacher to surrender their contractually guaranteed "duty-free lunch." Teachers extended this access only to favorite students or students who needed lunchtime to make up missing assignments or tests. Around the middle of the year, a third lunch space opened for students who were serving time-outs for behavior or rule violations via silent lunch detention.

My duty during this time was to sign students in and out. I was assigned this job because of knee issues from advanced osteoarthritis. The job allowed me to sit down rather than balance a

walking cane and a clipboard. I should note that it wasn't too far into the year when a colleague declared in a lunch duty meeting that it was unfair for me to get the door job all the time, because I got to sit down. Like students, there are a limited number of times of day in which school teachers and staff can control their presence and timing. Many teachers are dehydrated by the end of a day because they are not free to drink liquids throughout the day, as the rigorous demands of bell schedules limit opportunities to use the bathroom. Getting to sit down at lunch duty, or anytime during the day, is a big deal.

The ability to be seated was possibly the only aspect of this job that was a good fit for me. I am not interested in controlling middle schoolers' behavior, except to the extent that their physiological development puts them at risk for acting impulsively in ways that can harm them or others. Realistically, my enforcement of the sign in/sign out procedure was predicated on any given student's willingness to comply. When students' approached me to engage in the procedure, I complied. When they tried to sail past me, I asked for them to sign out, appealing to fairness and safety. To the student serving me a "You-can't-make-me-but-I-would-love-to-see-you-try" look, I would say, "sign out, please." I might repeat my statement, but my Crisis Prevention Intervention training dictates that if a student is not in immediate danger (to self or other), I am not to attempt to prevent their movements. Students who are angry? "Give time and space" (CPI, 2015). A refusal to sign out of the cafeteria is a safe way to exert personal power in a space that otherwise seeks to contain and control, all day, everyday. I know the students who refuse. I know their names, because I hear them in the mouths of adults all day long. I write the names down, signing them out and back in. Nothing to see here.

Lunch is a time of day in which students' were likely to have the hoods of their sweatshirt hoodies up over their heads. This is a dress code violation; but many of the adults assigned to the hard-tiled basement lunch room could relate to the human need for safety and comfort in a loud and chaotic space. As happens, enforcement varied. It occurs to me that having one's hood up is a way to control one's visibility in a space that may be perceived as hostile, loud, or unpleasantly boring. It's an assertion of personal power that's either assertive or defensive depending on the particular student and their sensory capacity. Many hoods are up during middle school lunch, until such time as an administrator enters, and enforces the uniform rules with an assertive "Hoods off." Me? In picking my battles, clothing did not make the cut.

*[March 6, 2020]* The first confirmed case of COVID 19 in my state.

*[March 13, 2020]* The governor declares a peacetime state of emergency, allowing him to issue a stay at home order.

*[March 15, 2020]* Schools in my state were temporarily closed until March 27, 2020.

*[March 25, 2020]* The governor issued a stay at home order; closing schools and non-essential businesses through May 4, 2020.

*[March 30, 2020]* Emergency distance learning commences.

## The Unprecedented Home/School Connection

A completely new space opens. According to state guidelines, distance learning begins in response to worsening local, regional, and statewide COVID-19 metrics. The walls of brick and mortar schools explode, and the classroom is each student's out-of-school environment.

This opened a range of challenges. Out-of-school environments varied, and in these early days, there were often lots of sounds coming back through the computer microphone: televisions, siblings, computers, household chores, adult conversations, pets, and other teachers from other virtual classrooms. During in-person schooling, family is visible at school in more formal ways, via conferences or meetings, parent groups or committees, or at the monthly food pantry. For a moment, educators have unprecedented access to student's and families' home lives, the expected and the unexpected.

As we entered emergency on-line school, the realities of working in a Title 1 school pressed upon me. Title 1, Part A is the section of the Every Student Succeeds Act (114th Congress, 2015) that allocates additional per-pupil funding to help mitigate the effects of poverty on student achievement (defined by statute as standardized test achievement). In person, my school feeds children three meals and two snacks a day, universal access, because the statistical occurrence of financial poverty for our students is in the eighty percent range. We provide social work services, counseling, healthcare, uniforms, school supplies, transportation and childcare. We bring the food shelf in regularly for family "shopping" days. For some families, school is the village that supports them.

The first priority when we shifted to distance learning was to provide remote food distribution. All the prepared meals students would have received in person were packed for pick-up. Weekly food backpacks (normally placed anonymously in student lockers) were boxed and available for pick up. Nonetheless, there were families who couldn't get to school, because their previous transportation access via school bus was revoked.

Teachers were forbidden to deliver things to students at home (liability for the district), but many of us, including me, did anyway. Home visits bring other levels of knowing: who lives between parents, who has moved or been evicted, for whom do we have correct or incorrect address information. I imagine that nothing is lost in these deliveries: Someone will find the delivery and be curious. Someone will benefit. It is necessary for me to believe this way, to maintain what sanity is available in this difficult professional moment.

In school-as-emergency distance learning, dress code is unenforced, so the commensurate assertion of personal control is turning off one's camera. In the first weeks, cameras were expected to be on. Perhaps a family or staff person complained, so there came a centralized order that teachers were not allowed to insist on students' visible presence. I initially felt good about this small allowance, but two months in, when I entered our shared virtual spaces, I occasionally saw only a wall of name letters. A for Alice, who's camera is off, T for Tomas, M for Mahmoud. When I posed a question, I had to ask students to unmute themselves in order to hear a reply. Are they thinking? Are they even in the room at all? I had no way to know.

Participation and engagement at a distance was difficult to interpret. There were students who consistently stayed in camera off/silent mode, but engaged with me directly when other students had left the meeting. One student with whom I connected in this fashion used the chat feature of google hangout if asked a direct question during class. In emergency distance learning, I was asked to consider any log in, at any time during the school day as "daily attendance." As the definition of attendance changed, so did my definition of engagement. Hasn't it always been true that

students tune in or tune out during instruction? Unless/until I engage with each individual student, how can I know their level of engagement?

My school district operated in this scenario from March 2020 through the end of the school year in June 2020. Outside of school, things were quiet until the end of May.

[*May 25, 2020*] George Floyd dies in police custody one mile away from the school building I serve.

[*May 29, 2020*] The arresting officer, Derek Chauvin is charged with third-degree murder and second-degree manslaughter.

[*June 3, 2020*] Former officer Derek Chauvin's charges are increased to second-degree murder and three other former officers, who were in attendance at the arrest, are charged with aiding and abetting second-degree murder.

### **Reimagined Spaces: The COVID Context**

A study is released: Twenty-seven percent of Black students, thirty-five percent of Latino students and thirty-nine percent of Indigenous students lack access to high speed internet. Fifteen percent of Black and Latino students and twenty-three percent of Indigenous students lack the hardware needed to participate in school online (Alliance for Excellent Education, 2020). The education first responders within my school system knew this, and had already sent home technology and free wireless hotspots. There were still significant access barriers, such as parent experience with laptops and tablets, as many parents relied on their smartphones for digital access. Families needed one-to-one tech support to set up and troubleshoot access issues. As a non-native digital instructor, "tech support" and "screen sharing" became classroom jobs in my virtual school space. My young, digital native students could navigate web-based applications fluently, and were excited to access this fund of knowledge in our class meetings.

[*June 2020*] The Governor issues a request for school district contingency plans for SY2021.

School districts in my state were asked to develop contingency plans based on three possible scenarios:

**In-person learning for all students.** This scenario was recommended for a future time in which the numbers of COVID cases and deaths stabilized or decreased. Schools would be expected to create as much space as possible between students and teachers, but would not be strictly held to the six foot social distancing guideline in classrooms. Outside classrooms, during extracurricular and other non-instructional activities, distancing would be maintained.

**Hybrid learning model with strict social distancing and capacity limits.** Schools will limit the overall number of people in their facilities and buses to fifty percent of their maximum occupancy. During in-school periods, a social distance of at least six feet will be maintained. Some students may remain on distance learning within this model, or may attend in person on certain days per week.

**Distance learning only.** Guidelines for this scenario were released as part of the daily COVID briefings, but they did not contain clear directives for how to proceed. The guidelines took a localized approach, instructing districts to do what was needed according to their communities' needs, and to maintain the option for ongoing distance learning for families no matter how they choose to open in fall 2020-2021.

[August 2020] New education job title emerges: Pod leader.

Racial and economic privilege became visible in new ways, as job postings for a new category of non-unionized teaching positions emerged: Learning pod leader. Parents whose lived experiences intersected wealth, white-collar, work-from-home employment and educational access, made their own educational plans for homogenous learning groups called pods, led by adult pod leaders. This phenomenon emerged simultaneously around the country (Schoales, 2020; Silverman, 2020; Weiss, 2020).

An organization representing Black/Brown/Indigenous parents held a press conference in front of my district's central office building (Danik, 2020). They had met with the superintendent and asked tough questions about the district's level of preparedness to serve Black/Brown/Indigenous students whose families lacked the economic resources to arrange learning pods. The community organization proposed that, as a function of educational equity, the school district should either arrange or fund learning pods for all students. Dissatisfied with the non-response received, and fearing a repeat of the learning conditions of spring, the organization announced a boycott of the district just prior to the start of school. They offered to assist families with the process of un-enrolling their children and enrolling them elsewhere, preferably somewhere that shared the group's urgency and interest in educating Black/Brown/Indigenous children equitably.

Given the opportunity to localize a plan, area school districts went in different directions, even within the same county (Cogdill, 2020). The urban districts, such as the one where I work, started off in distance learning, the first tier suburbs were a mix of hybrid, in person, and distance. By mid September 2020, confirmed COVID cases emerged from schools. Some districts responded by moving away from in-person contact, other districts held tightly to plan, but institutional COVID fatigue had set in.

### **Unimagined Stressors: COVID Fatigue, the Supply Chain and Incidents**

[September 9, 2020] Facebook query: Adults share experiences and difficulties with sending students to school under a mask mandate.





In Fall 2020, the impacts of institutional COVID fatigue were experienced by non-licensed staff providing state mandated child care to the children of first responders. Hazard pay was discontinued, and workers were no longer allowed the choice to work on or off site. These changes in policy were interpreted as a declaration of disregard from district leadership. Was attending to children in multi-age settings, supervising the distance learning of Pre-K through middle schoolers simultaneously, and managing classroom environments with inadequate custodial support the job for which care workers had signed up?

*[September 16, 2020]* Email - virtual open house instructions

I receive an action request, hidden within a link, within a google doc. "Create a welcome video for students and families for our virtual open house." The action request contains a due date (Noon on 9/23/2020), categories of information to be included, and suggested statements. These statements include: "Meals are available daily for pickup at several school sites;" "food boxes are available weekly;" and "School supplies were ordered for students and families, and we are awaiting their arrival. Currently, the supplies are on a ship in the South China Sea."

*[September 17, 2020]* Email - virtual learning incident

The headline "Distance Learning Incident" appears as a notification on my screen, after the end of the contract day. As a recipient (all staff\_school building list), I am unsure whether to be relieved or horrified that "a parent was inappropriate with a student on camera," because "on camera" forces mandatory reporting (all licensed teachers are mandatory reporters by license, but the nuances of this action are expressed variously by practitioners). I am left with more questions than answers, such as "What does inappropriate mean in this context?" There is rumored to have been a gun involved. The incident occurred in kindergarten, in an unspecified classroom (as required by data privacy). Counseling is available for affected students and/or teachers.

## Unimagined Spaces: Taking Refuge

[August-September 28, 2020] Co-teaching and English Language Development Groups (online)

Teachers are asked to focus on social emotional learning (SEL) primarily, and academics secondarily as we enter the new school year in distance learning mode. For classroom teachers, there was a district imposition of Responsive Classroom® community building structures into the recommended elementary schedule: Morning meeting and closing circle (Davis & Kriete, 2014). As an English as a second language teacher, I attended the morning meetings of my cooperating classroom teachers and incorporated SEL-related content into my small group meetings with students.

I leaned into my healing arts background and made an offer to my grade level team: “I am certified in secular mindfulness for children, would you like for me to host weekly mindfulness experiences and group processing time during morning meetings?” I proceed to build small mindfulness decks in the Seesaw platform to share with my colleagues. I was not sure how this would be received by students, so it was an instructional experiment. Students described the experience as “restful,” “calming,” and “focusing”. As students develop in their body-mind awareness, they started to describe sensations in their bodies, as well as sensory inputs they noticed in their environment when they quieted their minds and focused on breathing. To be clear, it is not quiet in the home environment. This indicates a growing awareness of and ability to use tools that allow students to control their alertness/agitation levels in spite of the environment. If that seems like a heavy lift for a child, understand that children do this quite naturally, all the time - zooming their attention in and out, favoring certain stimuli, blocking other messages out.

Through these interactions, I sensed that students needed an uplifting text, so I started the third grade English Language Development small group year with the mentor text *Hope is an Open Heart* by Lauren Thompson. The picture book features pictures of children who have experienced displacement, natural disaster, and other upheavals. It acknowledges the difficult feelings that come and go under hard conditions (“sad tears,” “angry” and “scared words”), as well as the comforts of small familiarities (“mother’s hand,” “father’s kiss,” “strong arms around you”). From my ESL teacher lens, the book allows me to teach the figurative language structure of metaphor (the direct comparison of two things using “is”), and the multiple forms and uses of the word *hope* (its noun usage versus its verb usage). It also served an SEL function when we wrote our own version of the book based on students’ lived experiences.

I was not prepared for the work I received from my students. Multiple students wrote variations of the same response: “Hope is the day we can go back to school.” True to instructional life, one out of six samples uses the verb form of “hope” rather than the noun form which is central to metaphor structure: “I hope the Corona virus goes away so that we can go back to school.”

## Where We Go Next: Unearthing

As I consider my next instructional materials for fall 2020, I am acutely aware of the social and political unrest that has erupted into protests and incidents of police brutality in the communities surrounding school. I am also aware that it is a presidential election year, and that the sitting President of the United States is staking his reelection on a campaign of nationalism that demonizes and criminalizes immigrants and People of Color through extreme othering. The families I serve, like many families in the United States, may hold mixed immigration statuses. In the public

schools, we neither question nor record information about immigration, so I make this statement as a suspicion which is true for some, and not others, but which I will never seek to verify. I do not assume my students' parents can or will vote; and I know that regardless of their abilities to participate fully in the republic, the outcomes of this election are intensely important for their welfare as residents. So while I am watching the President of the United States attempt to curtail legal and humanitarian protections, I decide to open a window to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights through a picture book.

I introduce it simply as "our next book," reading aloud to students and pointing out the pictures as I go. No students initially volunteer that they have heard of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, however, part way through the reading, on the page that references World War II, a student interrupts,

**Student:** "Did this happen a long time ago?"

I pause my reading to clarify that the original real document was written in 1948, after World War II.

**Student:** "Yeah, I thought this happened a long time ago. Back then, everything was black and white."

My brain scanned quickly through the array of possible meanings for this statement, settling on the most concrete (because we are eight and nine years old in our class).

**Me:** "The pictures and movies we have from that time are mostly black and white, that's true."

Here are some other initial connections and comments my students made:

**Text:** *World War II was a time of war when a lot of people died, and some people lost their homes and families.*

**Student:** "Kinda like now."

**Text:** *Laws should be applied without bias, and all people have the right to be protected by the courts.*

**Student:** "Yeah but, in real life? Not really."

**Me:** "What do you remember from today's reading?"

**Student:** "You can leave a country and come back."

These connections suggest to me that several of my students recognize the statements in the UDHR as aspirational. The project of human rights education, as I understand it, means to advance public knowledge of human rights and their universal applicability, which can surface the distance between daily lived experience and the theory statements of nation-states. This awareness raising scheme is designed to empower. Will that be the effect of this unit on my students?

I acknowledge the ways in which the human rights and basic human dignity of my transnational, multilingual students are violated. I think of the macro and micro aggressions they endure, their surveillance and harassment by policing bodies at all levels of government, the fact that the U.S has not signed key international treaties (like the Convention on the Rights of the Child), and I wonder: Is human rights education value-creative and empowering, or is becoming acutely aware of human rights violations just disruptive? Or even ridiculous? Human rights are aspirationally universal, but humans are not afforded these rights as they are described on paper.

My students live surrounded by social unrest following the murder of George Floyd. Many of them had the stores in their neighborhoods burned or boarded up. They blame the protestors for these actions, because that is what they heard at home or on television.

**Student:** “Black people burned down our stores.”

This crushes me. I am acquainted with some of the organizers of what came to be known as The Uprising. I know their work, their tactics. I watch the events unfold on the ground through their field reports and the media outlet Unicorn Riot on my social media feeds. My own thoughts went like this:

**Me:** *Grabbing milk off the store shelf to treat acute tear gas poisoning? Yeah, sure. Arson? No, not arson.*

I received and validated my students’ frustrations, and encouraged them to stay open to the possibility that more would be revealed about who actually set the fires.

[October 12th, 2020] 3rd grade social studies lesson, co-taught virtual classroom

I was participating with my students in their social studies lesson. The classroom teacher introduced a lesson on laws, rights, and responsibilities. I was thrilled, thinking this would be an opportunity for my students to shine because we had been studying rights in the context of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. The classroom teacher asked for examples of rights, so I attempted to prompt a connection back to our earlier lessons.

**Me:** “Ms. Harper’s students—we’ve been learning about rights, in our study of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Do you remember some of the rights that humans have, just because they are born?”

**Student 1:** “Hope?” (our first topic of the year)

**Me:** “We read about hope, that’s true. Rights are different. Describing rights might sound like this: Everyone has the right to...”

**Student 2:** “Rights are...everybody has the right to be kind to other people and help them out.”

**Me:** “Great example of a responsibility! Everyone has the responsibility to be kind and helpful.”

Kindness as a right, a privilege, a responsibility: My students might be leading a kindness revolution. Perhaps human rights are a difficult exercise in abstraction, especially if they are a new idea, if affirmation of rights is not specifically part of your lived experience, and/or you’re eight years old. Or perhaps my students do exactly understand rights in a way that is real and important to them.

### **Reality as Self-Generated Hologram**

This brings to mind something else I have been thinking: The pandemic and the murder of George Floyd have surfaced a disruption at the existential, perception-of-reality level. I’m not saying the phenomenon of blatant and systemic racism is new, or even that I was unaware of it before now, but reality itself appears more and more fragmented every day. There is a hypothesis

at the intersection of quantum science and spirituality, which describes perceived reality as a self-generated hologram (Eastwood, 2020; Nyland, 2019). I have never been more aware of the lack of overlap in perceptions of reality. Perhaps because of isolation and social media, I feel as if I am gaining a frightening level of insight into the diversity of holograms among my human co-creators. Some of these holograms are wonderful, some terrifying, each possessed of its own righteousness.

For example, a dear colleague died in the early days of COVID. She worked at a school across town, was on the school board of a nearby urban district, and was growing into community leadership. She got sick, was admitted to the hospital, then ICU, and never came out. That was spring 2020. This fall (2020), the forty-fifth President of the United States became ill with COVID. He reported mild symptoms, but was admitted to the hospital on a Friday, received experimental treatments and high-end drugs, was released Sunday and promptly held a press conference telling the American people not to fret over COVID-19. I fully believe that he believes those words, based on his lived experience. His entitlements and privileges as a White, male, head of state support and inform his holographic perception of “reality,” but few other Americans will share his experiences or benefit from such a high-level medical response.

Meanwhile, Republican candidates from my state continue emphasizing that we should not allow the fake pandemic to rule our lives or curtail our activities. As a teacher, I am attuned to rhetoric that schools ought never have been closed, and that children should go back to in-person learning immediately. The rationale used for this declaration is that children are unlikely to experience complications, if they even become infected, which conservative lawmakers seem to be downplaying as a nod to their leadership. Whenever I hear these arguments, I think, “*When schools reopen, who do you think minds the children? Do you imagine school as the utopian counterpoint to Lord of the Flies?*” I mind the children—a fifty-one year old White woman with high blood pressure. Educational support professionals mind the children—who are predominantly Black, Brown, Indigenous and retired folks, and who so far in this pandemic, seem most likely to become ill.

This is a moment when I experience the intersectionality of a life at the Pre-K-5 end of education: Elementary school teaching was historically one of the few professions open to unmarried women. It is a position of great responsibility, less than adequate resources, and little status. In the neoliberal project of American capitalism, what I do and produce is my worth, and frankly, multiple factors limit my worth and worthiness.

Gay (1993) affirms that teachers tend not to have the same cultural frames of reference and points of view as their students because “they live in different existential worlds” (p.287). This is also the case between teachers and politicians. My holographic perception of infection risk is not shared by the conservative lawmakers of my state.

[October 7, 2020] Derek Chauvin, the former Minneapolis Police Department (MPD) officer charged with murdering George Floyd, was released from jail on a non-cash bond. The Governor activated the National Guard to keep the peace (Georgiades, 2020).

In late October 2020, an email was issued from the superintendent's office of my school district. He recommended a partial return to buildings for hybrid learning beginning November 9th, 2020. District officials had not yet completed the walkthroughs of buildings, which were advertised as data gathering activities to assess our readiness to transition to in-person learning. The county in which my school district is located has the highest number of COVID cases in the state. In bold print, the letter goes on to say that teachers will continue to instruct students via distance

learning. I try to decipher this riddle: *I'm a teacher, I'm going back to in person learning, but also teaching via distance learning. Does the new phase entail distance and in-person learning? Is in-person school to be provided by robots?* Details will follow. Have a nice weekend.

Central to this recommendation is the superintendent's stated belief that children need in-person learning, because learning happens primarily in school. I understand the allure of the level of control that underlies the equation in-person schooling equals learning. In person learning centralizes control *over*—teachers, students, curriculum—and in that way, best promotes the project of acculturation. Within this brave new world, is that the purpose of education? How does standardized instruction (which is largely generated from a White perspective) interact or inform, or better yet benefit, students who don't live that particular hologram? How can we normalize and incorporate multiple perspectives into our efforts to reach and teach?

A few years ago, my school started an ongoing collaboration with Dr. Juan Carlos Arauz and E3: Education, Excellence and Equity to reimagine our narratives about students and their strengths. Dr. Arauz posits that deficit narratives arise from assessing discrete skills out of context with incomplete data, or even assessing the wrong skills in general. He conceptualizes brilliance in terms of the skills of cultural resilience, and poses to educators the following questions:

INNOVATION: Can your students set goals that are both attainable and challenging?

ADAPTABILITY: Can your students use experiences to test multiple hypotheses?

CRITICAL ANALYSIS: Can your students synthesize information and prioritize results?

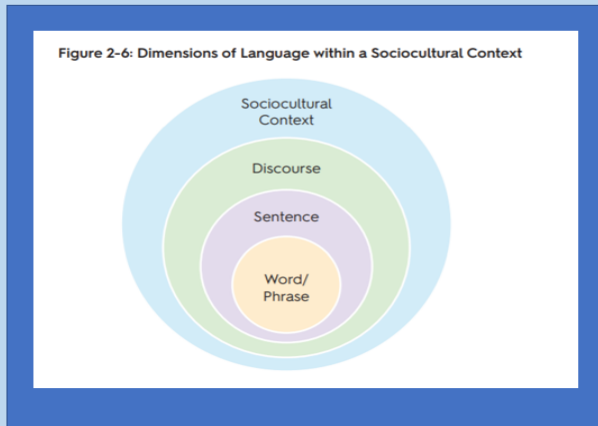
COMMUNICATION: Can your students persuade, reason, and write with their voice?

TEAMWORK: Can your students work successfully in diverse team settings?  
(Arauz, 2010)

Variations of these skills have been identified elsewhere as twenty-first century skills. I worked throughout the pandemic with my English language development groups on helping students to self-identify the areas of brilliance they and their families possess based on the E3 IACCT model (innovation, adaptability, cross-cultural communication skills, critical analysis and teamwork). This was the opening activity for every English language development (ELD) small group, and we charted our collective progress on the walls of our virtual and in-person classrooms. The following slides demonstrate the process of teaching about and documenting student cultural resilience (Harper, 2022).

World Class Instructional Design and Assessment English language proficiency standards, which drive the work of English language development in my state, make clear that language learning occurs in a larger context than “the language of school” (WIDA, 2020). WIDA defines this climate as the sociocultural context. In the United States, the sociocultural context of multilingualism crosses multiple markers of status and belonging: Race, nationality, citizenship, monolingualism, and achievement expectations.

## Learning Occurs in a Sociocultural Context



What is the sociocultural context in which multilingual learners operate at school?

- Systemic racism
- Implicit bias
- Xenophobia
- Linguistic Minoritization
- “The soft bigotry of low expectations.” – Bush

In my state, students who are multilingual, identified as English learners, and have immigrant or refugee status are given one year’s exemption from standardized testing. All other English learners are required to participate in the standardized testing of grade level requirements. So the IACCT activity, while intended primarily for social emotional learning purposes, must also fulfill my obligation to assist students in both English language development and meaningful access to grade level content. As such, I consider both Common Core ELA standards and WIDA Key Uses standards in how I position the lesson within my small group sessions.

By third grade, students become responsible for making arguments using a claim-evidence-reasoning discourse structure. One way for me to support students in developing comfort with this structure is to challenge them to utilize the structure with familiar, personal content. In this case, the content is a challenge to identify how they or their families demonstrate brilliance via the IACCT qualities (e.g., innovation, adaptability, cross-cultural communication skills, and/or teamwork) and then successfully conveying this thinking within the discourse structures of argument (e.g., claim, evidence, reasoning).

### 3<sup>rd</sup> Grade CCSS Standards

#### LANGUAGE

- [CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.L.3.1.1](#)  
Produce simple, compound, and complex sentences.
- [CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.L.3.5](#)  
Demonstrate understanding of figurative language, word relationships and nuances in word meanings.

#### SPEAKING, LISTENING, VIEWING, AND MEDIA

[CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.SL.3.4](#)  
Report on a topic or text, tell a story, or recount an experience with appropriate facts and relevant, descriptive details, speaking clearly at an understandable pace.

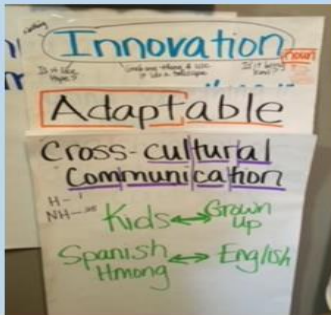
## WIDA Key Uses (2020)

### **Argue**

- State opinions or construct tentative claims and offer those in class discussions
- Recognize the difference between claims with and without support
- Offer observations to support opinions and claims
- Develop emerging research skills to use in constructing claims
- Begin to use data from observations as evidence for their claims

I taught the vocabulary of IACCT one concept/word at a time, taking advantage of intervals in which certain terms appeared in classroom content (innovation, in the engineering design cycle and social science, adaptability in our study of life science), taking special care to point out polysemy as it occurred. I never ask, “Do you know this word,” because not to know something in some contexts and ages could be a stereotype threat trigger (Platts and Hoosier, 2020). I reframe word knowledge as “Have you heard this word before” in order to normalize word exposure. Occasionally, students will offer a cognate from Spanish. If it is not offered, I teach cognates during subsequent exposures, which increases student connectivity to English academic vocabulary.

### Teaching Cultural Resilience Vocabulary



- Word
- “Say it with me/Read it with me”
- Repetition (7)
- Establishing familiarity (H/NH)
- Simple, student-friendly definition
- Use it in a sentence

Once the target word is taught, I issue the question for consideration “How do you, or your family members, show or demonstrate (insert target word)?” I then use language acquisition strategies, as needed, to support students in producing an English language reply (claim) with evidence and/or reasoning.



## Levels of Questioning: “Since last time, how did you or your family demonstrate (IAACT)?”

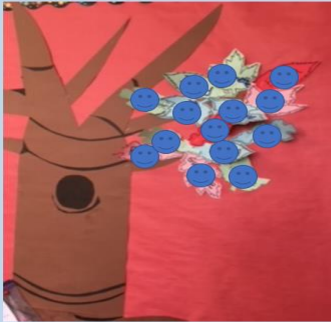


- Total Physical Response (TPR)
- Point to
- Yes/No
- Choice question (either/or) “Is it an example of innovation or teamwork?”
- Fill in the word “Helping my mom with the dishes is an example of \_\_\_\_\_.”
- Questions with a word bank of possible responses
- Questions that elicit a single word response
- Questions that elicit a short phrase
- Open ended questions

### Additional scaffolds:

- Picture file cards
- Native language
- Peer support

## Response Exemplars



### Student claim/evidence statement:

“I demonstrated (IAACT word) by (action/activity).”

Teacher prompt: “How is (action/activity) an example of (IAACT word)?”

### Student reasoning statement:

“(Action/activity is an example of (IAACT word) because \_\_\_\_\_.”

When a student is able to identify an example, construct and share a claim with evidence and/or reasoning, they get a leaf on which to write their name. The leaves are then collected and added to our cultural resilience tree. In distance learning, I filled out the leaves and added them to the tree. When we returned to school, students completed and placed their own leaves. Because the nature of my service to students is language development, their contributions, however partial or complete, are embraced and welcomed. Partial answers (single words or phrases) are supported to completion through sentence frames and “I say, you repeat” sequences.

## Language Development Over Time



First 2 months: All examples were teamwork.

By winter break, students could use “teamwork” and “innovation.”

It took 6 months to get students to consider multilingualism (“cross-cultural comm. skills”) an asset.

By March, students were adding adaptability (“adaptable”).

By April, a student asked “Teacher, what’s that analysis one?”

Fievre (2019) suggests that teachers can create the conditions of safety in their classroom through the micro-affirmation behaviors of attending and active listening. Both language support and asset-based self assessment are different from micro-affirmations, but they also have validating effects. Twice to three times a week, students identified and affirmed their own and their families’ brilliance. It’s no accident that it took students a long time to think of multilingualism as an asset; that speaks to the sociocultural context of both school and life in the United States. But we got there. A few brave students even worked out how to use “critical analysis” as a way to describe their brilliance. Our tree filled out such that by the end of the year, the bulletin board in my classroom was flush with beautiful leaves. Students reflected at the end of the year, “Wow! Look how smart we are! Look how much we learned! We are pretty brilliant.”

The “learning loss” narrative would have me focus on the reading and math skills of students at a time of social unrest and public health emergency. But the pandemic further highlights that resilience-based competences—like innovation, adaptability, cross-cultural communication skills, critical analysis and teamwork—are exactly the skills youth need to cultivate in order to solve the problems we are facing. How can my students be deficient, given their substantial cultural resilience capital?



(Harper, 2020)

## The Function of School

There is, in any conversation, what is said and what is not said. Are the unsaid nuances of the conversation about distance versus in-person schooling really about the child care functionality of school, which should not be confused with learning? Early on in the pandemic, there was grave concern over the potential loss of access to the technical social fixes provided by school—food, health care (both physical and mental), child care. Even in distance learning, five days per week child care was extended to medical/emergency first responders, and food boxes that contained a week’s worth of breakfasts and lunches were distributed to any family who needed school to feed their children. If the value of schools to society is in the distribution of the materials that occupy the largest blocks of Maslow’s hierarchy of human need (Maslow, 1943), then I wonder, are public schools the safety net capable of sustaining the future?

If the function of public schools is acculturation and subjugation of children into middle class, White ideals, we get high marks for our in-person efforts. However, that project falls apart outside the school building. I wonder if it is these control functions—which by their nature are authoritarian, dehumanizing, and disrespectful of the multiple cultures, languages and perceptual realities that exist within any school’s stakeholder groups—that most contribute to our climate and culture issues, discipline disparities, and opportunity differences? If so, then does the pandemic offer an opportunity to advance educational equity? Conversely, if things soldier on absent conscious collective effort and dialogue, we may witness the further resegregation of learning spaces. This would be an unfortunate but predictable achievement for a mid-sized city where de facto segregation is the unofficial standard, and student achievement and graduation rates are predictable based on race. How might the present currents of social unrest contribute to an expansion of school priorities and valuing?

### Reflecting Disruptions as Potentials and Questions for Further Consideration

I question the narratives that emerge in the media of “learning loss.” The discourse is too familiar, as deficit thinking is identified as a prevalent mindset for the teachers of America’s children (Delpit, 2006). I’m unclear what “learning loss” means, because it seems predicated on the idea that everything was fine before students were out of school for one to two years. Untrue in my area, where many students were behind grade level expectations before the pandemic. Look at the achievement data of any district pre-2020 and I venture that you will find similar evidence. So instead, I would pivot the conversation to how schools demonstrated brilliance, offer areas for values clarification, and surface questions for further dialogue.

Creative disruptions found opportunity during COVID. These disruptions represent my experience of the unimagined spaces of teaching and learning from my “personal, local and immediate” vantage point (Singleton & Curtis, 2006). I also believe that these spaces indicate possibilities beyond “returning to normal” for public schools.

**The school:** From brick and mortar to virtual spaces and platforms - SeeSaw, google classroom, google meets. What are the untapped potentials of asynchronous learning on demand? How might asynchronous teaching create space for more Black, Brown, and Indigenous teachers through making efficient, accessible use of elders and community resources?

In fall 2022, I visited a school and had the opportunity to examine their beginning of the year math and reading data and I noticed something interesting. The baseline scores of the incoming kindergarten class were higher (cumulative, as a cohort) than the scores of any other grade level in the building. Might the conditions of remote schooling of older siblings have had a net positive effect on school readiness and background knowledge for the SY23 kindergarten class? Is this a byproduct of more time with and exposure to caregivers?

**The school day:** Even while teachers were asked to provide a structure that mirrored the school day, students and families participated in school in a variety of ways - some students attended scheduled classes and groups, others completed posted assignments to the best of their ability without group attendance or with sporadic attendance. One colleague, a physical education teacher, posted short demonstration lessons on TikTok as a way to engage students where they are, rather than demanding a controlled space and time for learning. How might accessible, on demand platforms be utilized more widely for academic pursuits? How might the school day be reimagined to capture more students while accommodating a variety of schedules and needs?

**Attendance:** School is a compulsory activity, and as such, truancy is a violation of law in my state, which blows back inconveniences and effects on parents. When school is in person, attendance is fairly straightforward - a student is in physical attendance or they are not. In the unimagined transition to virtual school, attendance has come to entail making one's presence known in any capacity: Attending one meeting or group in a day is attendance. Completing any assignments is attendance. A phone call or text message is attendance. In this sense, attendance has morphed from seat time into touch point. How might these touchpoints be utilized as coaching opportunities in support of learning? How might the location, timing, and availability of schooling serve families' needs and wants in more expansive ways?

Currently, school attendance requirements vary state to state. While the state in which I practice defines compulsory education by age (ages seven to seventeen), programming is offered from cradle to adulthood through formal and informal channels. Fifteen states end compulsory education requirements at age sixteen, and only eleven states begin compulsory education at age five (NCES, 2018). Depending on whether or not a state has truancy laws, compulsory may or may not have accountability means. What might universal kindergarten mean for students and families? How might states accommodate families who need students to earn income while also providing more options for career readiness? How might time and instructional efficiencies allow secondary students additional choices?

**Grading:** In the early days of virtual schooling, my colleagues teaching at the middle school level kept elaborate spreadsheets that monitored work completion. Meaning, if you completed assignments, you were rewarded high marks. These marks divorced themselves from notions of academic standards, mastery of concepts, or applications of knowledge. In the days when schooling was preparation for factory work, this type of assessment of persistence might have tracked some sort of continuum of development from childhood to factory-readiness. Grades for individual work, from a culture perspective, reinforce the White cultural archetypes of individualism, meritocracy, and competitive achievement (Hammond, 2015). Is that the education that is most relevant today? How might the disruption of the pandemic impress upon schools the value of skills not normally assessed that are essential for work life today - skills like innovation, adaptability, critical analysis, cross-cultural communication, and teamwork (Arauz, 2010)? How might systems reconceive attainment from an individual pursuit to both collective and individual measures?

**Play:** A colleague despaired that our students, outside of school, have no place to play during the lockdown. In my encounters with students through small groups and morning meetings in four classrooms, I find students adapting to virtual play spaces by sharing gaming handles and entering into virtual building projects. I discovered that a triad has developed in one of my classes, who are building together in an online, gamified maker space. I propose that this conversation demonstrates teamwork (three students working together toward a collective goal of building on the Roblox platform).

**Student 1:** “What should we make next? Maybe we should make a unicorn.”

**Student 2:** “I think we should make a cat.”

**Student 3:** “I know! We can make a unicorn cat.”

**Student 1:** “A cat-i-corn!”

**Student 2:** “YEAH!”

Students collaborate quite naturally toward their own goals and purposes. How might this creative, collaborative tendency be utilized in classrooms as a routine condition for learning?

### **Unimagined Space: An Historic Practitioner’s Recommendations**

It’s time to reimagine the goals of school. I offer for consideration the model of a Japanese theorist and educator, Tsunesaburo Makiguchi (1871–1944). Makiguchi stated that transfer of knowledge is not and can never be education’s purpose (Bethel, 1989, p. 6). Based on the inability of schools to equitably prepare students, or even come to consensus<sup>1</sup> on the *wh*-criteria (who, what, when, where, why, and how) for essential content, this admonition is sensible. Given that diversity and variation creates a massive web of values, histories and potential futures, all of society, including the family and immediate community, must contribute to the knowledge transfer and organization process for its developing children. Makiguchi held education, aside from knowledge transfer, as a guiding and facilitation process that repeatedly re-centers the responsibility for learning back to students (Bethel, 1989, p. 6). In his model, school is the adventure outfitter store (e.g., the REI or Midwest Mountaineering) of the life-long learning journey: Students come to school for tips, tricks, and equipment, but climb the mountain themselves, on their own time and route, or pursue other avenues of knowledge transfer, according to their own and their families interests. I’m not advocating uneven access (which arguably we have now); I am advocating expanded options that value home and community funds of knowledge (Gonzalez, et al., 1995). This seems strange as I write it, and yet, it is clear that there is no “one size” of education, and that this already occurs naturally without intentionality on the part of educational systems.

In accepting that the nature of all life, including human society, is diversity and variation; it makes sense that within the social framework of a family or community, there would be various educational needs, roles, and desires. In order to meet these needs, Makiguchi proposed that home, school and community make specific contributions to learner development. As such, he advocated for half-day schooling, and half day community or home-based learning that centered on vocational and life skills. Made in response to marginalized, disaffected, and/or disengaged learners in his own time, Makiguchi’s proposal finds an eerie resonance with the current emergency models

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1. I acknowledge that the Common Core State Standards are an attempt at shared understanding of essential content, and that these standards are neither universal (not all states utilize them) nor valued equally among school stakeholders.

of hybrid and online learning. His model is not based on the assumption that more schooling is more learning. The consideration of Makiguchi's educational philosophy and recommendations is that learning is always present, as it resides within the interests and motivations of the learner. He envisioned, as an aspiration of schools, the achievement of a maximum economy of both teachers' efforts expended in teaching and children's efforts in learning (Makiguchi, 1981–1988). When forced into the less than ideal conditions of emergency online learning, schools and families were challenged to imagine and actualize new levels of economy in K-12 teaching and learning. As we enter the next phase, what innovations and adaptations might be intentionally woven into the fabric of post-pandemic schooling?

### **Reflection, Non-Closure**

Glenn Singleton writes that when exiting a conversation that directly addresses race and racialization, one must expect and accept non-closure (Singleton & Linton, 2006). These reflections are as true to my lived holographic reality as I can make them, colored by positionality and memory. As I reflect on these perspectives, I am struck by their dichotomies: The unimagined spaces, uncovered and/or co-created during this formative time; and the places imagined and experienced, but dissimilarly perceived amongst participants.

The longer I work in public schools, the more I experience a sense that schools serve the function of child containment over educative development. This feeling has been re-enforced by the push from some parents and school officials for a return to in-person learning before vaccines are universally available. As a parent, I understand the difficulties of working from home while simultaneously managing children. As a former latch-key kid, I can also appreciate parents who don't want their children to be home without supervision. Yet there exists here, too, previously unimagined spaces. One example comes from a recent commentary in the *New York Times*, from a Black parent who declared that her child would not return to school to be a target for racially predictable discipline disparities. In distance learning, her eighth grader has found ways to control her exposure to negative tropes and racial microaggressions, ways that are unique to the virtual classroom (Anderson, 2020). School is neither a safe nor empowering space for this student. Sit with that, while simultaneously sitting with the large scale inability of school bureaucracies to predictably create the conditions of safety for children, youth, or adults.

As I return to the in-person classroom, I reconsider context and holographic reality. I find myself deeply questioning the function of schooling for the community I serve. One aspect is the container, as in-person schools provide childcare. Another purpose is knowledge transfer, which might be supported by standards attainment, if schooling resulted in outcomes that were less predictable by racial and economic status markers. Knowledge transfer, as a goal in itself, requires neither proximity nor synchronous instruction. But the voices of my students from our co-created classroom book ring loud and true in my head: "Hope is when we get to go back to school." Such as it is, there is something available here in peer friendships, comradery, and interest, that deeply meets the developmental needs of my students. In their third grade holographic reality, the brightest imagined future is co-created through highly structured days in brick and mortar containers. Let this current pause recommit me to hold myself, my colleagues, and my system able to do better as we strive to construct a way forward with our communities.

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