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We Didn't Return to Campus: COVID-19 Pandemic as an Opportunity for a Critical Reflection on the Essence of Education

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I remember the moment I first heard the term, *coronavirus*. It was towards the end of January when I watched a video of how quickly a hospital was built by the Chinese government in the city of Wuhan. Staring at the footage on my phone, I watched as the building was completed in an impressive 10 days; it had 1,000 beds. I curiously followed new developments about the coronavirus through news reports. At the time, most of what was known about COVID-19 was that it was a strange virus making many people incredibly ill. In the anxious pockets of my mind, I entertained ideas of an apocalyptic-type disaster befalling the world. However, I moved on in the daily hustle and bustle of life while trying to tame my looming thoughts. It was the year 2020, and I taught at a small liberal arts college in upstate New York; it was the final day before the institution's spring break in March. By this time, the term coronavirus was more familiar to people. As everyone knows now, for many students and educators, this would be the last time they returned to campus that school year. COVID-19 devastated many aspects of society and the world. Even as I write this, people are all still in the jaws of the pandemic.

Not all people have experienced COVID-19 in the same ways. As with any hardship or catastrophe in society, the poor and marginalized get the brunt of the blow. In the United States, COVID-19 has killed more Brown, Black, and Indigenous people than any other group, with Black people accounting for 15% of the total COVID-19 deaths (Centers for Disease and Control and Prevention [CDC], 2021; The COVID

Tracking Project, 2021). COVID-19 has also disproportionately affected low and middle socioeconomic class families (CDC, 2021), demonstrating the manifold ways people's experience of the pandemic varies according to their race and social economic class.

Personally, this pandemic affected my loved ones and me in very different ways than it did my White affluent acquaintances. As a Mexican woman with two children under the age of four, my husband and I were miles away from our hometown near the Southwest border. It was an isolation that asphyxiated, both because of what was *not* known about the virus and because of what *was* known about the virus. What was certain at that time was that COVID-19 was a deadly and highly contagious coronavirus. As I thought about what I was experiencing, I also thought about the experiences of my students and the varied difficulties some were encountering. I sent them emails hoping they were well and encouraged them not to worry about our class. I waited for students' replies in agony and looked at my class roster to check off names of students who did not reply. It was a terrifying time, and so many things were uncertain. What was certain was that schooling, in my case higher education, would not stop: tuition reimbursement was not an option—better dead than unprofitable. While this statement may seem extreme, for me it was the essence of what was actually happening all around me.

I recall reading an email from my institution in bewilderment. It called for moving the rest of the semester's content and teaching online due to the growing numbers of COVID-19 cases. This is not what unsettled me—what shocked me was that schooling would continue amidst a growing pandemic where illness, lack of medical supplies, and death engulfed everyone. The number of deaths grew each day; people died alone in the hospital

without loved ones nearby. Expert disease specialists, medical researchers, and doctors knew very little about the novel coronavirus. During this time, societal mask-wearing was not announced as a recommendation, and everyone was encouraged to remain in place and socially distance. A mundane task, like going to the grocery store, had become a deadly risk. Yet I was expected to teach on literacy? Yet it was expected that students participate in class and complete assignments? This angered me; I felt it was unfair for my students, and I tried my best to do what was in my power to make space for processing what was happening and communicate to students that the course should not be their priority.

Before I continue, I want to make clear that critically reflecting on the role of higher education calls me to enter the judgement seat as well. I understand that, as a professor, I both benefit from and prosper over the capitalistic nature of higher-ed institutions. Ultimately, I aid in maintaining the institution's power because it also translates to mine. I am aware of the contradiction I live in, trying to kill the beast while I feed it. This paper is a personal critical reflection on what I perceive as the essence of the United States education system in light of the COVID-19 pandemic. As a framework for thinking, I use critical theory couched in Marxist economic theory to reflect on the role of the education system in a neoliberal capitalist society at the start of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Marxism, COVID-19, and Education

The question of the essence of education is one I constantly think about. Various frameworks lead me to different answers. My favorite one is a cocktail of critical theory and Marxism. These theoretical lenses are tightly connected. Critical theory views knowledge as socially

constructed and its value based on a society's dominant group's ideologies (Kincheloe, 2010). By questioning mainstream ideologies about the role of an education system, I analyze ways in which knowledge is produced and disseminated. Further, critical theory holds that this knowledge is produced in power-driven economic and political systems. The impact of social class and race on students' experiences demonstrates correlations with broader patterns of socio-economic stratification (Anyon, 1980, 2010; Apple, 1979; Ladson-Billings, 1993).

Being critical about systemic and pervasive inequalities allows for an analysis of oppression that includes institutional and relational forces such as the institution of education. Critical theory focuses on ways in which knowledge is produced and addresses ways knowledge may be biased or oppressive (Bredo, 2006). For example, in the education system, curriculum plays a pivotal role in maintaining White supremacy ideologies (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017; Gillborn, 2009). The schooling process becomes an avenue in which society creates and reproduces economic stratification (Anyon, 2014). Power and social class influence what knowledge is deemed valuable by a society. Therefore, school curriculum is not neutral; it is produced within power-driven political systems that maintain it (Kincheloe, 2010).

In the United States, the institution of education is viewed as a place where society's knowledge is passed along and created. Specifically, it is in higher-ed institutions where knowledge is produced and legitimized. This is important because it positions higher-ed institutions as the ones who control the means of production (Anyon, 2010, 2014). To examine the impact of these oppressive systems on economic spaces, a Marxist view of capitalism is useful in understanding the

socio-economic role of the education system, including higher-ed. In this context, the means of production encompasses everything from the curriculum used in higher-ed to the regulated ways in which the institution legitimizes knowledge through awarding degrees.

According to Marxist theory, controlling the means of production is key in maintaining the dominant group's power (Marx & Engels, 1948). This positions the education system, especially higher-ed, as gatekeepers that maintain social economic stratification. Individuals with college degrees tend to make more money than people who do not, and they also tend to have a better quality of life and even live longer (Case & Deaton, 2015; Oreopoulos & Salvanes, 2011).

A capitalist system depends on social inequity to function. In simple terms, Marx and Engels (1948) described the ruling class of a society as the bourgeoisie (or capitalists). The bourgeoisie control the means of production through private ownership of the resources. The proletariat, or workers, are exploited through their labor in producing products for the bourgeoisie. I borrow Marx's perspectives of a capitalist economy and compare it to the dynamics in higher-ed. In my perspective, higher-ed institutions are the bourgeoisie because they have control over means of production. In this case, the students would be the proletariat since they do not hold the power to award themselves a degree.

In the United States during the pandemic, it became clear that PK-12 schools were not just sites of learning, but also played an important role in childcare. With many PK-12 schools closed, families could not work, and workers not working meant fewer profits for the capitalists. Suddenly, a lot of attention was focused on schools and opening them up quickly. Politicians who never seemed too concerned

about school attendance began to shout off the rooftops that schools had to reopen and were safe (Groppe, 2020). This was during June 2020, a time when much less was known about COVID-19, and the CDC was still investigating the implications of COVID-19 in schools. The 2020 White House administration would not allow public hearings by CDC officials to provide greater clarity about the safety of opening schools for face-to-face instruction (Behrmann, 2020). To me, it was clear that the economic and political bourgeoisie were willing to endanger the lives of children and educators to keep their profits secured.

This political and economic relationship can be understood through the concept of neoliberalism, the unrestrained access and permission given by a government to private individuals that allows them to control the most resources in society in order to maximize their personal profit (Chomsky, 1999). The implication is that government institutions, such as schools, reflect the economic interests of the bourgeoisie. Neoliberalism, as a concept, can help explicate why there was such a major push by politicians to open schools quickly. Neoliberalism also provides a lens to examine ways in which economic interests shape policy around schools.

By default, the bourgeoisie is not invested in the interests of the proletariat, such as fair pay or sharing in profit or working conditions. Investing in the interests of the proletariat would lessen the profits of the bourgeoisie. In this context, the proletariat were the educators and students who were being pushed to return to school. From my reflective analysis, COVID-19 demonstrated that economic profit trumped health and life itself. While this has always been true, modern society had not witnessed the economic impact of a pandemic.

The spring semester of 2020 still does not make sense to me. At that time, I did not get much sleep and my heart pounded in my chest as I thought about COVID-19's impact on the world. One of the things I thought about was education. What did education mean in this context? What was its role in society? What was the role of higher-ed institutions, especially in a time like this? What did my course matter in the larger scheme of things—in life? While I often pondered these questions before the pandemic, this was a different intensity of thought. It was different because my questions were not based on the hypothetical. Before the pandemic, it was easy to dismiss these kinds of questions as existential or purely philosophical. However, COVID-19 flung these questions from the philosophical realm to the concrete, every-day reality of society and shone a spotlight on the critical role of the education system. It seemed that the education system's function was not about its teaching and learning but more crucially as a major institution on which the country's economic activity depended.

Conclusion

Schools have more to do with socializing students into the oppressive hierarchies that society has created than they do with learning. Research has long documented and established that a student's schooling experience is largely determined by their socioeconomic class, their race, language, national origin, and ability (Anyon, 2010; Duncan & Murnane, 2014; Reardon, 2011). The strongest predictor of a student's academic success still correlates most often with family income (Reardon, 2011). COVID-19 brought existing social inequalities to the surface and demonstrated that an individual's income influenced how they experienced the pandemic. The

response to the COVID-19 pandemic made it glaringly obvious how economic profit controls so much of the decision-making in the schooling process. While this kind of analysis on education is not new, COVID-19 made blatantly clear that the role of the education system is tightly woven in neoliberalism.

One of the most important factors in the learning process is the need to feel safe (Maslow, 1962; Tracey & Morrow, 2017). COVID-19 created situations in which many students did not feel safe. Many students were not physically safe, and many were in critical psychological distress because of what was happening to their loved ones and the world around them. How could students be expected to be engaged and learn while the world faced a deadly pandemic? Perhaps society knew students would not be able to learn much, but keeping tuitions secured was a higher priority than learning.

Using the COVID-19 pandemic as an opportunity to critically examine the education system from a neoliberal context helps to understand its role in a capitalist society. Recent research suggests that early school openings in Texas correlated to increased community spread of COVID-19 (Courtemanche et al., 2021). This is an example of how economic concerns for profit surpassed concerns for safety in schools and local communities.

While most students physically did not come back to campus after spring break, the economic engine demanded that schooling continue no matter the cost, even at the cost of health and safety of its citizens. Throughout my years as an educator, I have resisted dehumanizing my students. I believe any critical educator would agree that the work teachers do is becoming less and less about teaching and learning, and more and more about securing political and economic outcomes that benefit a neoliberal agenda.

COVID-19 provided the opportunity to see the dynamics of a neoliberal capitalist economy and the role of the education system. By resisting the forces of neoliberal capitalism in their own educational spaces, educators might get a glimpse of the essence of what it means to teach and learn. I believe more attention should be given to the role of neoliberalism in the education system. By doing so, people might discover the breadth and depth of its effects on the education system, which in turn produces and maintains social inequality and socioeconomic stratification.

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