



Walking Lightly: Teaching and Learning in a New World

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ABSTRACT

The classrooms and schools of America have undergone a dramatic shift in 2020 with an ongoing global pandemic and a nation-wide civil rights movement. In this article, two teacher educators reflect on a framework for moving forward in this new world, posing a series of questions to consider as teachers, parents, and students navigate our new educational space.

Keywords: changemaking, agency, empathy, teacher education

INTRODUCTION

“Historically, pandemics have forced humans to break with the past and imagine their world anew. This one is no different. It is a portal, a gateway between one world and the next. We can choose to walk through it, dragging the carcasses of our prejudice and hatred, our avarice, our data banks and dead ideas, our dead rivers and smoky skies behind us. Or we can walk through lightly, with little luggage, ready to imagine another world. And ready to fight for it.” - Arundhati Roy on April 3, 2020

Over the past nine months, the world has dramatically changed. In the midst of a global pandemic and an international civil rights movement led by the US-based Black Lives Matter campaign, the ways in which we interact, communicate, teach, and learn have shifted. Many of our traditional learning spaces are closed and schools are relying on digital spaces to continue instruction. Many students and families find themselves struggling to access those digital spaces, facing increasing inequalities in internet and technology

access (Ceres, 2020). As teacher educators working with pre-service teachers in higher education, we have seen our university students leave their shuttered campuses and pivot their own courses to online learning, but also immerse themselves as assistants and student teachers into K-12 online classrooms, as well. We have witnessed our students take to the streets, advocating for their own and others' health and wellbeing, and protesting the police violence and racism in America. During this time, we have worked to listen, learn, and walk alongside our colleagues and students of color, focusing on what it takes to become co-conspirators in this work. As we look to the future of the school year ahead of us, with many questions unanswered about the state of schools and universities across the nation, we are left with one grounding question, guided by Arundhati Roy's guidance: how do we move forward, breaking with our past, and walk lightly through this new world, this portal?

A FRAMEWORK FOR MAKING CHANGE

As professors who train teachers within our respective educational fields of early childhood education and inclusive education, we come to our work with philosophies grounded in liberation and transformation. For us, this means examining current schooling practices with a critical eye and then imagining new, alternative, inclusive and expansive methods for teaching all students. Yet we know first-hand, as parents of young children, the current challenges we face regarding distance learning, the social emotional wellbeing of our children, and uncertainty among constant change. To face these challenges and re-imagine a way to support our students, our families and our own teaching practices, we turn towards the concept of changemaking to inform our current work.

Changemakers, a term used by the Ashoka organization, are “empathetic, ethical actors who will positively impact their own lives, their communities, their schools, their companies, their countries and the world, now and throughout their lives” (Start Empathy Initiative, 2017). These are the people in our community who have both “the will and the skill to make positive change, who puts empathy in action for the good of all” (p. 11). In these times of fast-paced change, rather than one leader telling everyone what to do, changemaking involves the empowerment of everyone. New possibilities, rather than problems, foster reflection and growth. Schools and educational spaces are changed by those within them. To use a disability advocacy catchphrase, “nothing about us without us” (Charlton, 2000).

In 2017, far before the pandemic, we asked a group of teacher candidates within a teacher preparation in Connecticut about how they understood and witnessed changemaking in educational spaces. Specifically, we were

interested in changemaking skills and concepts during their coursework and fieldwork experiences within four components of: (1) *Empathy*, or personal understanding and sharing of feelings; (2) *Advocacy*, or support of a cause; (3) *Agency*, belief in the ability to make a change; and lastly, (4) *Reflection*, or consideration of what has been learned.

We found that these teacher candidates clearly recognized the need for empathy. They saw the natural connection between empathy and the other changemaking pillars of advocacy, agency, and reflection. They felt empathy came naturally to their practice, “this is our strong suit, we see all different students, so it's just something that I think we're natural at.” However, we were surprised to find that these teacher candidates described feeling a lack of agency when teaching, noting that making change in education is hard. They observed challenges and problems in the institution of schooling but struggled to identify how they could make a difference. One candidate told us: “I can't find my voice, I want to, but I can't.” When asked why they felt this way, they described multiple levels of accountability and surveillance in teaching, with warnings “not to rock the boat.” They felt that these barriers to agency were “bigger than themselves.” Based upon this knowledge from these teacher candidates, we now look directly at our current climate, these “shifts between worlds” and ask: What do we need to do? How can we find our voice? And, how can our empathy inform our agency?

EMPATHY INTO ACTION: RECOMMENDATIONS & NEXT STEPS FOR PRACTICE

To begin to imagine how we move forward, how we walk lightly during a time that feels so heavy, we return to the core components of our changemaking framework, using them as a compass for grounding our practice as educators. We posit the following guiding questions for other educators, parents, and caregivers in the field:

Remember our Empathy: How can I actively and consciously work to listen and understand my students and their families? How does this understanding influence my pedagogy and practice?

Engaging in Advocacy: How can I continually speak up and speak out for all students? What supports do they need and how can I help them access those supports? What resources do I have that can support them right now?

Focus on our Personal Agency: What is in my control? What aspects of my teaching and learning can I adjust, enable, or even resist to create a learning

environment that is safe and nourishing for me, my students, and their families?

Continuous Reflection: How can I continually and collaboratively reflect on my teaching practice? Who are my co-collaborators in this work and how can we work together to construct a community of wellbeing?

CONCLUSION

We say to our educational community -- keep walking. By whatever means you move through space, go forward purposefully, believing that you can make change. Even when it feels as though the world is filled with uncertainty, don't stop, don't shy away. Travel, but pack little luggage, and ensure to walk lightly. With each step, deeply consider ways to be a changemaker, and to address the questions we have posed. Keep pace with the new and different ways to work with, care for, learn from and teach our students - whether in person or over a computer screen. Re-focus on what is in your control and let go what is not. Pass through the gateway of this new world to develop classrooms and spaces for learning that are curated with hope and collective care.

Resources & Inspirations for Educators

<https://startempathy.org/>

<https://www.tolerance.org/classroom-resources>

<https://www.wested.org/covid-19-resources/>

<https://neadjustice.org/black-lives-matter-school-resources/>

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