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The COVID-19 Diaries: Identity, Teaching, and Learning at a Crossroads

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Despite the fact that American education has at its core strived to provide pathways of opportunity to remedy socio-economic inequalities, as educational institutions transitioned into online virtual classrooms due to the COVID-19 pandemic these inequalities have come into sharper focus for us. During the process of engaging in a larger self-study, we became more aware of the stark socio-economic disparities of our students in a virtual space, specifically amongst students of color, and how these disparities affected learning outcomes and their identity. Juxta positioning the situated in-between spaces of in-class and virtual environments our identities as educators were fluid and intersectional, negotiated in response to student interactions thereby enabling changes in our Dialogical Selves. The sample for this study consisted of 2 faculty members and 40 students. Data sources included reflexive journals, recorded class sessions, students' questionnaires, and artifacts such as student feedback collected through "exit tickets" as well as recorded meetings. Some findings include (1) students' identities were negotiated differently in face to face classrooms vs. virtual classrooms, (2) fluidity in intersectional identity due to intersections of I-positions in the dialogical self, and (3) acknowledging and accepting the presence of COVID-19 created a sense of community in the virtual classroom (4) incorporating self-care and caring pedagogical practices provided an empowering space for students and educators.

Keywords: identity, equity, technology, COVID-19, dialogical self theory (DST)

INTRODUCTION

From its inception, American education has at its core strived to provide pathways of opportunity to remedy socio-economic inequalities. This is evidenced by Horace Mann who stated "Education, then, beyond all other devices of human origin, is the great equalizer of the conditions of men—the balance-wheel of the social machinery" (Mann, 1865, p. 669). Holding on to this ideal, students of various socioeconomic, sexual orientation, religious, immigrant, and racial/ethnic backgrounds have access to a quality empowering education and equal opportunity to excel in school and life-an emphasis on social mobility, a cornerstone of American democracy. However, many scholars today contend that we are far from Mann's "equalizing" goal. A snapshot of the educational landscape showcases the inequalities existing amongst its student population. These disparities stem from everyday racism, classism, and bias in all its forms–it is prevalent in the structures of education and contributes toward hegemonic ideologies. Further, neoliberal policies tend to marginalize those who are socio-economically disenfranchised by favoring others with the means to choose optimal

educational settings. Since education is an inherently socio-cultural process, the insidious nature of such disparities affects students' identities in the situated environment of the classroom thereby enabling changes in their Self.

The COVID-19 pandemic seems to have exacerbated such inequalities and has impacted students of color disproportionately. While such inequalities do find a way of filtering into the classroom, in an online space they tend to be magnified, thereby hindering learning outcomes and problematizing their academic identities. Additionally, our identities as educators shift as we negotiate our positionalities in response to student interactions. Thus, educator and student identities are constantly negotiated, each affecting the other contextually and spatially thereby necessitating changes within individual selves. The shifting nature of individual positionality in the individual Self is in "dialogue" with the other selves in the society of mind and extending into the environment. The shifting nature of identity and self of students and teachers negotiated within the shared situated space of the virtual classroom has enormous implications for student learning and best teaching practices in different regions of the United States of America as well as other countries currently in a similar situation.

BACKGROUND

Schooling during the COVID-19 pandemic has had disparate effects for students across the socio-economic ladder. UNESCO reported that the pandemic has caused educational disruption and school closures for over 1.2 billion students (Giannini and Brandolino, 2020). Academic institutions moved to online virtual instruction mid-March with most higher education students required to vacate their dorms on campus. While most K-12 and university closures were initially announced as temporary with extended spring breaks, they were later modified to fully online indefinitely on advice from governmental agencies. The education community was forced into an unplanned online learning experiment. Institutions began using various digital and video conferencing tools to help students connect and stay on track to complete the semester. However, this created challenges especially for students from low-income families. Many students did not have a place to return to, reliable internet access, or a support system to help them through this crisis. School closures due to the concerns of the spread of the pandemic turned a spotlight on equity as a marginalizing factor, especially how they contribute to educational disadvantages and students' disfranchisement.

We premised our research on the assumption that our virtual classrooms would mirror our face to face classrooms and be uniquely amenable to promoting equitable learning environments. We soon realized that this was not the case. While educational technology and e-learning are not new resources, the crisis-driven approach to replicate the dynamic nature of the face-to-face classroom in a virtual classroom was fraught with difficulties. Socioeconomic inequities due to poverty issues of access to reliable technology, ethnicity basic needs, and other background factors seemed to impact our students of color disproportionately in the virtual environment. Although everyone's lives were upended due to COVID-19, we observed our students of color struggling to navigate the transition from face to face classrooms to online virtual classrooms. Most did so in silence, their renegotiated identities marginalized and masked. Their lived realities negatively affected their engagement in the virtual classroom.

It is a generally held mainstream perspective that education has the potential to elevate opportunities and empower those who are disadvantaged due to socioeconomic status. Contrary to this view, neoliberal education is commodified and helps students dominated by individualism to be consumers of an educational product the purpose of which is intended to better their economic condition (Slaughter and Rhoades, 2004). Since it allows for the privatization of public domains and a privileging of a free market, it enables those with financial means to procure a better educational product including school choice (Ravitch, 2016). These policies are detrimental to the success of "poor, black, Hispanic, and non-native English speakers are least likely to have such access, and they are most likely to attend segregated low-quality schools" (Brathwaite, 2017, p. 1). Researchers agree that structural inequalities in access and opportunity prevent minorities and students from low-income families to achieve their educational goals (Delpit, 1995; Darling-Hammond, 2000; Giroux, 2004). Further, the lack of access to digital equipment can disproportionately impact students who come from low-income families. In a recent Observer article, Finn (2020) reported that "Forty-four percent of New Yorkers living in poverty do not have access to the internet… [and] when looked at through the lens of race, the statistics highlight a deeper inequality: 30 percent of black and Hispanic New Yorkers lack access, while 20 percent of white and 22 percent of Asian residents go without reliable internet at home" (May 12, 2020, paragraph 8). The "digital divide" exacerbated existing educational inequalities due to school closures and social distancing measures (Sen and Tucker, 2020). While socioeconomic disparities seemed to contribute significantly to students' access or lack thereof to technology, racial-ethnic factors played a role in exacerbating these differences (Jones and Abes, 2013), reinforcing societal normative ideologies and linguistic tropes. Further, since identity processes are inextricably linked to individuals' relations and comparisons with the other, the educational environment provides a space for evaluating individual understandings of identity. This "in-between" space according to Bhabha (2001) serves as a locus of negotiation and "provides the terrain for elaborating strategies of selfhood—singular or communal—that initiate new signs of identity, and innovative sites of collaboration, and contestation, in the act of defining the idea of society itself" (p. 136). Here their lived experiences and situatedness in the virtual classroom becomes central in self-definition.

The disconnect that we observed in our virtual classrooms due to COVID-19 pushed us to evaluate our taken for granted assumptions of student identity and how that impacts their learning. Further, the differences in online student identity and classroom student identity forced us to acknowledge the complicated nature of privilege amongst our students and our

own as educators, as power relations within the classroom became more obvious. We fully acknowledge that while our virtual classroom revealed profound disparities in our students' access to support and opportunities, it also made us question the effectiveness of our pedagogical practices whether it was "caring" enough. In this research, we focused on the ways in which the virtual environment exacerbated student inequalities, amplified their differences, and reshaped their identities, specifically how did the inequalities affect the identities and self of students of color. We critically analyzed the nature of our pedagogical practices in the virtual classroom and how it impacted student learning. Further, we evaluated how our identities as educators were negotiated due to student interactions in the virtual classroom and the implications of these interactions on our sense of Self.

Intersectional Identities

As such the identity labels tend to emerge through interpersonal and social interactions in broader social contexts and systems of power and inequality thereby necessitating the recognition of identity categories one ascribes to (Weber, 1998; Torres, 2003; Anderson and Collins, 2007). These identity labels are never neutral but rather negotiated, it affects ways of thinking, influences perceptions of self and others, motivates and predicts behavior, and learning outcomes. Some aspects of identities tend to remain central, and others are created and recreated, constantly shifting, and negotiated based on the situatedness and responsivity of individual actions (Abes and Kasch, 2007). While each theoretical perspective (psychology, CRT, ecology, post-structuralism) uniquely locates identity within its disciplinary lens, they share some commonalities notably the influence of social context and social groups on the individual. Some others (LATCRIT, feminist intersectionality) focus on the multifaceted intersectional dimensions of identity (e.g., race, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation). As Hall (1996) states, "identity is a narrative of the self; it's the story we tell about the self in order to know who we are" (p. 6). These perspectives assert that an individual's identity is neither grounded nor a given, rather it is fluid and situated, intersecting with lived experiences contextually and spatially (Evans et al., 2010; Jones and Abes, 2013).

As an analytic lens, the intersectional perspective of identity seems most appropriate when evaluaing student identity as various aspects of their identities exist simultaneously in any given context. Intersectionality accounts for fluidity in identity by considering the socio-cultural advantages and disadvantages of individuals specifically when they occupy simultaneous dimensions of oppression and privilege in contextual settings (Risman, 2004; McCall, 2005; Grant and Zwier, 2012). In this regard, Dill and Zambrana (2009) list four observations characterizing intersectionality:

> (1) Placing the lived experiences and struggles of people of color and other marginalized groups as a starting point for the development of theory; (2) Exploring the complexities not only of individual identities but also group identity, recognizing that variations within groups are often ignored and essentialized; (3) Unveiling the ways interconnected domains of power organize

and structure inequality and oppression; and (4) Promoting social justice and social change by linking research and practice to create a holistic approach to the eradication of disparities and to changing social and higher education institutions (p. 5).

Our students are from very diverse backgrounds. Some have resources, opportunities, and support outside of school, while others were left to take care of themselves, their basic needs and necessities during the COVID-19 pandemic. Their racial-ethnic backgrounds tended to exacerbate socioeconomic inequities. These factors influenced their identity and sense of self. Their lives, differences, and disparities came into sharp focus when we transitioned into online virtual classrooms. With everyone's lives upended, many of our students of color were at an enormous disadvantage. As they struggled to navigate this transition, their vulnerabilities were amplified.

Dialogical Self

Since educator identities are negotiated and constructed through intersecting relationships and social interactions in academia, it requires an approach that can make sense of the fluidity and conflictive tensions in identity formation. In emphasizing the shift in educational space to a virtual environment due to COVID 19, we pay attention to its effect on our pedagogical practices and our professional and personal narratives of self and identity.

The dialogical approach offers a valuable way of conceptualizing teacher identity by framing identities as the dialogue that takes place between the I-positions, the "voiced positions" of the Self (Hermans, 2001). The Dialogical Self Theory (DST) emphasizes the complexity and multifacetedness of the self. Since the Individual self emerges through social interactions, it is reflective, dialogical, and context-driven. Proposed by Hermans (2001, 2012, 2014) the theory asserts that individuals navigate several I-positions within the self as a society in the mind at any given time. From this lens, the individual self is seen as emerging through social, historical, and societal processes between the Self- I "internal" (individual's mind) and Self-other "external" (dialogue with others within the mind), an interconnection between the self and society of mind, a process of positioning and counter positioning (Hermans and Hermans-Konopka, 2010). These "I-positions" as an "internalized positional designation" (Stryker, 1980 p. 60) takes on a "unique voice" that is relational and dialogical, positioned, and counter positioned responding to multiple social narratives temporally and spatially. From this lens, identity is the outcome, "it is the expectation held by each I-position" representing a particular aspect of identity, due to "sociocultural positioning" (i.e., situatedness), and a point of temporary attachment (Hall, 1996). From this lens an educator's identity is constantly negotiated "through intra- and interpersonal processes" (Kaplan and Garner, 2018, p. 2,036), "It is a product of attempts to interrelate I-positions in ways that can lead to a sense of self that is more or less coherent, and which can be sustained in the everyday work that takes place in classrooms" (Henry, 2019, p. 266).

Thus, the dialogical self and intersectional identity evolve out of social interactions as individuals actively participate in

its construction, deconstruction, and negotiation. While our identities were negotiated due to student interactions in the virtual space, our location of privilege as educators both allowed and hindered how we might "know" our students.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

This research began as an Institutional Review Board (IRB) approved self-study that focused on identity intersections and negotiations between teachers and students and the examination of our pedagogical practices. Self-study research was selected for its ability to highlight our becomings, the tensions, dilemmas, to assist in our understandings of ourselves, our teaching practices, and how they affect our students, their identities, and learning (Hamilton, 1998; Berry, 2004; LaBoskey, 2004; Loughran, 2004). As an inquiry guided research, self-study highlights the reflective, active, and transformative nature of teaching and learning. Critical friendship played a central role in our self-study research. The present research study grew out of our evolving critical friendship. Costa and Kallick (1993), define a critical friend as:

> A trusted person who asks provocative questions, provides data to be examined through another lens, and offers critique of a person's work as a friend. A critical friend takes the time to fully understand the context or the work presented and the outcomes that the person or group is working toward" (p. 50).

Being a critical friend to each other helped us explore our practices as teacher educators, with a lens focused toward intentionally broadening how we understand ourselves and our students. We aimed to provide alternative perspectives and feedback to one another without judgment (Kember et al., 1997) utilizing the self-study method to sustain ourselves as faculty and scholars in a space of vulnerability and openness (Hamilton et al., 2016). We share the belief that our identities are socially constructed, and multiplicitous, and benefit from regular, rigorous problematizing in dialogue with a critical friend to effective make sense of the identified roles associated with our positions in our institutions, our experiences, and professional identities as this study evolved (Murphy et al., 2011; Pinnegar and Murphy, 2011; Davey, 2013). From our initial conversations together, we established norms for engagement to honor what we recognized as necessary for this work: honesty, trust, and vulnerability with oneself and each other. Such intimate scholarship (Hamilton, 1998; Hamilton and Pinnegar, 2014) requires a fluidity of process that takes into account time, attention, and dialogue that is both supportive and probing.

Since the spatial/temporal nature of dialogical self and identity framed this research, we sought to delineate students' intersectional identities and its influence on their view of self, specifically how they perceive themselves through individual self and others' lenses and its implications for teaching and learning. As Hall (1990) suggests, "identities are the names we give to the different ways we are positioned by and position ourselves within" (p. 223). Thus, our position as educators is from the standpoint of being "with" our students. The "with" is in "relation to" our students. It is a tensioned space of negotiation and

becoming. During the process of engaging in this larger self-study, we became aware of the stark disparities of our students in a virtual space and how these disparities affected their learning.

Participants

The sample for this study consisted of 2 faculty members and 40 students. We are teacher educators at a small catholic liberal arts institution in the mid-Atlantic, USA, who infuse intersectionality and social justice topics in classroom discourse attending to our students' experiences as first-generation college students from immigrant and underrepresented backgrounds. Charity is a faculty member and associate dean in the School of Education. Self-study affords her the opportunity to explore and refine her pedagogical approaches and to engage in productive and meaningful critical friendships. She has taught teacher education students in her course Educational Assessment Development and Evaluation Models, as well as undeclared first year students in University 101: Dream, Dare, Do for the last two years. Likewise, Lavina is a faculty member in the School of Arts and Sciences, teaching a host of philosophy courses and coordinating the undergraduate honors program. When teaching ethics, and dialoguing about contemporary moral and social justice issues, Lavina regularly notices paradigm shifts in student thinking. This led Lavina to self-study to evaluate her role in such shifts and to explore the self-study approach during her 2 years as a full-time faculty member.

Students vary in demographic backgrounds, age, race, and ethnicity. Sixty five percent of the students in this study were female and 34 percent were male; 33 identified as first-generation college students, while 51 percent as second-generation and two students were foreign. Seventy four percent were between 18 and 20 years old; 18 percent were between the ages of 21–24; four students were working adults between the ages of 26–48. Twenty three percent of the students who participated in this study identified as white, 12 percent identified as black; 18 percent identified as Hispanic; and 46 percent of the students declined to identify. We ensured that all students were given a thorough explanation of their informed consent form, with the option to forgo participation and we provided assurances that all students' identities would be kept anonymous.

Data Collection

First, we reviewed our recorded virtual classes maintaining reflective notes of the exchanges revealing the intricate nature of students' racial-ethnic identity and how it contributed toward their academic identity. Next, we wrote individual narratives via google drive exploring the nuanced nature of teaching in-person vs. teaching virtually. This introspective evaluation enabled us to critically evaluate our identities and roles as teacher educators. Additionally, we reviewed each other's narratives and served as each other's critical friend (Schuck and Russell, 2005). We engaged in a process of collaborative inquiry where we provided one another with ongoing feedback (Placier et al., 2005) by seeking clarification, asking probing questions, and exploring both similarities and differences between our experiences. We used introspective reflexivity and peer debriefing to add credibility to our self-study. The goal of critical reflection and

introspective reflexivity was to engage in a hopeful activity that focused on obstacles to student equity and how these obstacles affected their identity and ours in the virtual classroom.

Data sources from Fall 2019 and Spring 2020 included reflexive journals, recorded class sessions students' questionnaires, and artifacts such as student feedback collected through "exit tickets" in both the first year course *University 101: Dream, Dare, Do* and the second year philosophy course *PHIL 250: Making Moral Decisions*, as well as recorded meetings. In our weekly meetings, we discussed emergent themes through the lens of how the disparities disenfranchised our students. Over a shortened semester, we engaged in online regular meetings to debrief and analyze all sources of data.

RESULTS

The salient features of this study revealed that there is a dynamic nature to the multifaceted identities for both teachers and students that emerged differently in the virtual classroom space. Initial findings from student questionnaires administered to our classes during the Fall of 2019 and Spring 2020 semesters before the shift to online virtual instruction revealed two broad categories of identity factors: (1) intersectional identity; and (2) a more personal understanding of self. The shift to virtual instruction exacerbated student inequalities and amplified their differences. Our students of color struggled with identity factors and how it affected their learning, which had implications for their sense of self.

Multifaceted Identities in Face to Face Classrooms

The identity factors of immigration, ethnicity, social class, and first-generation status intersected with one another in complex ways and heavily influenced students' perceptions as evidenced in their statements. For example, their perspectives ranged from "Being Hispanic, we are known to have "hands-on" jobs, or do "dirty work" but that is not the life I want for myself or my future family. I want to be able to support my parents retiring early" to "My grandparents didn't come to any college, they went straight to working in factories after coming from Puerto Rico to provide for my mom/aunts/uncles." Self-expectations of students of color often emerged as mirroring the American ideal of working hard to be successful. Their I-positions took on the unique voice of resilience. Students articulated hopes of achieving more than their ancestors and parents; they expressed a collective sense of internalizing responsibilities to make family members proud.

While some identity factors intersected in empowering ways, others lent themselves to marginalizing effects. For example, "I have always done well in school, so I put a lot of pressure on myself to do well and not disappoint my family. They have high expectations for me too. I am Nigerian." In this response we see a high degree of awareness of the student's immigrant status and the expectation of that status, to be "better than." Here the self of the student is located by their perception of parental expectations.

This is marginalizing the student's identity. Her Self- I position as a Nigerian intersects with the Self-other position of parental expectations. This is marginalizing the student's identity due to the need to conform to familial expectations. Hermans (2001) view who asserts, "The self is not only 'here' but also 'there,' and, owing to the power of imagination, the person can act as if he or she were the other and the other were him- or herself" (p. 250).

The second category that emerged was students' understanding of self-co-mingled with academic identities. Some students reflected, "I would identify as a student who is trying to build a good life for myself in the most efficient way possible" and "Academic influence is the fact that I always do work on time and only want the best grades as possible, this makes me a perfectionist." These quotes show students' keen awareness of their academic and personal identities. These are internal I-positions taken by the student "I am a good student," "I am a perfectionist." The I-position also holds a future expectation of "wanting a good life." From the lens of DST, these internal I-positions can take on the present and future expectations, they may be in agreement or conflict with each other based on context and situatedness. The I-positions (internal and external) in the self of the individual's mind extend into the environment taking on unique roles i.e., identities.

Negotiated Identities: A Virtual Disconnect

In face to face classrooms, students' identities were associated with characterizations of themselves as "Very academically driven, constantly studying & doing work ahead of time" and "Organized, studious." When instruction shifted to virtual, we observed the disconnect with the students' articulated identities. External factors and the situated nature of identity often influenced students' representations of self. During an observation, Lavina noticed a student who had previously presented herself very differently in Charity's class.

> In Sara's introduction, she mentions that she is outgoing...I didn't see it all. Maybe because I have had Sara as my student for 2 semesters. She was very reserved in my classes. In my 2nd class, she slowly opened up. So, I see a disconnect. Was this her public voice? My instinct tells me it is. The question is why did she decide to use her public voice" (Lavina, Course Observation 1).

Charity experienced Sara as outgoing during face to face instruction, but when the course shifted, Sara retreated literally into the virtual background. We discussed the reasons for the inconsistency in the presentation of the self and could not determine the source. While other students' perceptions of Sara at the start of the semester, as evidenced by the feedback exit slips, revealed "I love how outgoing, fun and enthusiastic you are" and "Your bubbly personality will be great in the classroom #outgoing," this did not continue online. This was the first indication that suggested to us that representations and evaluations of the individual self, differed, based on the modality of classroom instruction. It became evident that students' identities, and sense of self in the virtual classroom seemed either negotiated or marginalized.

To confirm our initial findings, at the end of the semester we asked students how they defined their online vs. face to face classroom identities. Students were clear that they did not feel as comfortable to participate as openly in the online virtual classroom space. "[Face to face] classroom[s] makes teaching more fun and interactive as you can see other people face to face and read reactions. The online classroom is interactive but not as fun as classroom learning. Online classrooms require more focus to understand what's been said" and "I feel less motivated to do work and instead rather find other things to do." Students withdrew more often and were more reserved online. As one student explained "For my online identity, I became more straight forward and technical in my approach to class. In my classroom identity, I wish I could have showcased a little more personality, but I felt less sure online even though I knew everyone from the first half of the semester."

Examining Our Pedagogical Practices

We had similar expectations of being a critical friend to each other. We mirrored a shared vision of examining our pedagogical practices to benefit and empower our students. Toward this goal, we questioned shifts in student identity as it negatively impacted participation and student learning outcomes. Students shared the same classroom community, face to face in the 1st half and virtually during the second half of the semester. Reasons for shifts in students' identities prompted us to critically examine our pedagogical practices in the online virtual classroom. For example, Charity reflected:

> As boundaries between school and home began to blur, exploring the shifts in our intersectional identities were also a source of comfort. My responsibility quickly became making strategic adjustments to a range of assessments and activities and I tried to remember that it would take students time to transition (Charity Journal, 5–20).

Further, we tailored assignments to the online virtual environment and gleaned that students needed more explicit direction online. We surmised that this could have been a reason why they pulled back; students who struggled to adhere to deadlines were more focused on the details of the course rather than deeper understandings and meanings. White students were more apt to report that "The online change felt like things carried out the same as they would physically." By contrast, we were struck by the feedback and disengagement from our students of color. The disparity was stark. We focused on uncovering what was causing students of color to withdraw from interacting in the virtual classroom; was it a result of equity-access, privilege, or both? Focusing on this disconnect, Lavina observed,

> A classroom tends to equalize students. You don't know their "background" unless it is visible (race) or personally shared. I was struck with the home situation of my students. One student was feeding her less than a year-old sibling bottled milk. Another, a young mother of 2 mentioned she wasn't getting enough sleep due to homeschooling her kids. In the background of another student, I saw 4 kids and a grandmother all in one room. These were in stark contrast with other students who had a quiet place,

their room, and animals around. It saddened me to see that the students who had issues were my students of color... Seeing was very problematic for me. And here I was thinking about staging and presenting myself in the virtual classroom, these students had more pressing issues to consider. They call education the great equalizer… I am not so sure. Education can become an amazing equalizer only if individual equity is considered (Journal, 5–20).

As observed, a lack of access to educational space and family responsibilities caused students of color to disengage. While they retained their identity as a student, the I-position of voice was marginalized. At times, the Self-I position seemed masked and shut down. The dialogue between the various I-positions in the self of the individual lent itself to a marginalized identity caused by intersections between ethnicity and socioeconomic status SES. Further due to being located by the students in the virtual environment, Lavina's I-position (Self-other) about student identity was conflicted. Students' situatedness and lived experiences caused changes in Lavina's situatedness. This in-between space that both Lavina and the students occupied was one of marginalization and disenfranchisement.

As educators, we acknowledged that there can be no equality without due consideration to issues of access and equity. The disparities in our student population were reinforced in our online virtual classrooms. It became clear that our students' sense of self and identity was intertwined with their lived realities and inseparable. We lamented the role of structural and systemic inequities present in our students' lives. The ideals proposed by Horace Mann seemed like a distant dream in the age of COVID-19. It forced us to reevaluate the meaning of "equal education for all." Issues of technology access were one of the starkest differences. Twenty years ago, Charity had a stock of loose-leaf paper and pencils that she exhausted each year to help alleviate equity issues. By contrast, today's virtual classrooms demand Wi-Fi hotspots and Chromebooks to close these learning access gaps. Charity explored options to provide students with loaned laptops rather than relying on their phones. However, when a student quietly explained she needed to sit outside the closed public town library to utilize internet access after running out of her phone plan minutes, it became clear that learning virtually at home for an extended time was presenting challenges that would not be easily resolved.

We were forced to reflect on the effectiveness of our pedagogical practices, and how we could attempt to overcome some of the inequities faced by our students. We acknowledge the lived realities and hardships faced by our students due to socio-economic inequalities. In recognizing the limitations of our privilege as educators, we began to think about ethical implications about shared understandings, communally agreed-upon principles of engagement, codes of involvement that guide actions, and set rules of participation that ensure safety and well-being, productivity, positive learning, and development in virtual classrooms. For example, we reflected upon the ramifications of recorded discourse between participants, student responsibility in maintaining the safety of online presence, and the problems of creating and maintaining a safe space in a

virtual classroom. Lowenstein (2008) conceptualization of ethics emerged that emphasized maximizing good and minimizing harm and suggested that ethics are an attempt to think critically about human conduct, determining what is right and wrong, what is good and bad.

Teaching is often characterized as a humanistic profession that requires kindness, care, compassion, empathy, an understanding of others, and an ability to build connections with a variety of people. While we cannot alleviate the socioeconomic inequities, we focused on modifying our pedagogical practices by humanizing ourselves and establishing care and care-based practices as the focus, regardless of the learning format. We focused on strengthening student relationships by providing opportunities for dialogue and communication, consideration for student unique circumstances, alleviating student anxiety, and fostering a sense of community in the classroom. For example, Charity began to meet with a few students' multiple times per week to review in greater depth class session material that was harder for some students to process in a virtual setting. By meeting at different times of day in small groups connectivity issues also tended to improve. Although adding small group sessions was time-consuming, students asked more questions, sought feedback, and slowly student performance and participation improved. Even with the inclusion of caring practices, Charity noticed that students of color were less likely to accept course review invitations, and encouraging emails sent often went unanswered.

Acknowledging and Accepting the COVID-19 Presence

After the shift from face to face instruction to online virtual instruction it was impossible to avoid COVID-19 as an ever-present element, it filtered into our classrooms disrupting teaching and learning. As the study progressed, there were moments of clarity when we recognized the value of acknowledging COVID-19 openly and addressing it with our students. This was a critical way in which we care-based practices. Charity shared:

> There came a point when I gave up trying to have a "regular" class. Instead, we began to start each class session with a brief discussion of personal updates about any family members who were immediately affected, as well as the statewide updates and how these might play out. We began to create a space during class to unpack these challenges (Journal, 4–20).

Charity was situated by her students, her Self-I position as a caring educator conflicted with the Self-other position, her views of her students. The dialogue between the two I-positions in her mind was negotiated thereby creating a space and allowing for potentially empowering learning outcomes for all students. Applying appropriate inclusivity and humanizing perspectives, Charity expertly converted the in-between space into a learning community that helped foster participation of the students in the virtual environment.

As Charity and her students settled comfortably into virtual learning, a hacking incident in the virtual classroom seemed to shatter the growing sense of community. Charity noticed two unwanted guests join after 20 min of a class session and despite multiple attempts to block their joining, these two individuals burst into the class yelling and messing with the class verbally. Charity canceled the call after a second attempt and afterward moved to use the zoom waiting room feature from then onwards. When debriefing with students about the negative profile pictures used by the hackers depicting racist images, many students first reported that they did not know what was going on, that they were "surprised." For some students, like Charity, this was their first experience being "zoom bombed" and they expressed feelings of "disappointment" explaining that "you would think people would change in college" not realizing these hackers were most likely from outside the university. Another student explained that this was the second time for her, and found it "pretty obnoxious, disruptive, and didn't understand the reason for it." As an educator, Charity made a space to discuss this incident in the next class session, acknowledging that if the class was together in person such an intrusion would never be permitted nor have occurred. The nature of virtual learning however had revealed a vulnerability she had not anticipated, one that in her mind she should have been able to prevent. Her sense of self as an educator meant protecting her students from individuals who showed horrific images yelling hate-filled racist statements toward others. While Charity took steps to prevent such attacks in the future, the event reinforced her sense that there was a need to discuss with students it's impact. Like Charity, there was a student who struggled to get the images out of her head, while other students felt "there are just sick people out there." As an educator Charity wanted to ensure she could minimize the negative effects of the intrusion and struggled ethically with the prospect that perhaps a student in the course potentially could have shared the session access information, even inviting these unwanted crashers. Her Self-I position as a caring educator led her to acknowledge and accept that this incident was a direct result of the COVID-19 circumstances; her students expressed agreement that this is one of the unfortunate realities of the virtual classroom since COVID-19. Charity couldn't help but question if students of color perhaps held back more in the virtual environment as a result of feelings of lack of safety in the learning environment? She made sure to remind students that the university was instituting the virtual waiting room for all classes, and that an investigation of such incidents was indeed taking place; such security breaches were taken very seriously and would hopefully be prevented in the future.

Toward the final weeks of the semester, we observed 3-fold effects of incorporating effective teaching practices. First, we used COVID-19 as a teachable moment, as the above instance illustrates. As a class, Lavina and Charity established routines to help incorporate aspects of identities outside of school and to discuss how we were coping. On some occasions, Charity asked students to select something they wanted to share from home since boundaries between school and home were increasingly blurring. Students enjoyed showcasing pets. Bringing a joke to class was encouraged, and on "April Fool's Day" students wearing silly glasses and hats lightened the mood. Second, we adjusted

course content, assignments, and provided practical assistance for students who were teaching full time. For example, a full-time kindergarten teacher was leading his fellow teachers in his school with technical assistance, virtual learning resources, and guidance, so the class joined in by selecting a children's story and using Flip grid to record a read-aloud for him and his students. Charity saw no reason to exclude this from course assignments and asked students to post feedback for one another as part of a class assignment. And third, exploring virtual instruction meant taking time to explore apps, integrate activities into our assignments, and discuss the benefits and challenges of using varied modalities with K-12 students. We leveraged student assignments to explore and use technology apps in real-time to benefit virtual instruction (e.g., iMovie, Kahoot, Flip grid, and TicToc).

Lavina and Charity both saw the benefits of creating a community of learners through care-based practices. It reflected in better student learning outcomes. However, Lavina's experiences and narrative of online virtual instruction was one of disillusionment. She was very often forced to acknowledge the realities of the virtual classroom stemming from a lack of collaboration and engagement from her students of color.

> While the university expects students to sit in a quiet place, dress appropriately, etc., how is it even possible when they don't have space…? This is so frustrating. How can rules be enforced here. Yes, I too would like some sense of decorum, but I cannot ignore their situatedness. They don't have to tell me; I can see it. I wonder if students don't put the video on because they are embarrassed by what others might see. Maybe they feel unsafe and cannot share themselves. Maybe they are afraid of the mask falling away. If I consider myself as a caring teacher, I must consider this (Journal 4–20).

Lavina bristled at the rigidity of the structures at large and insisted on relaxing the expectations to acknowledge and account for students' lived experiences. This lack of equity amongst the student population became more pronounced when relating to their lack of access to technology. For Lavina, it became more evident as the semester progressed. The current reality of "remote learning" highlighted the digital divide, the socio-economic divide, and the racial divide as she struggled to engage her disengaged students. Her Self-I and Self-other positions were positioned, and counter positioned by the situatedness of her students. She noticed,

> I know at least two students have not signed on, maybe because they have no access to laptops (they are African American too). How do I help them if they have no way to access the internet? I heard someone in a meeting mention about having students log in through their cell phones. Now, if I remember correctly one student does not even have a cellphone! (Journal 4–20).

This made Lavina despair about the nature of inequity and how it tended to disenfranchise students of color. While she considered herself to be a caring teacher, she questioned the nature of the virtual environment. It made her question her privilege as an instructor:

> The more time I spend in the virtual classroom, the more disillusioned I become as I face the lack of equity and equality. How must the student feel in showing their world to the rest? At times like this, I am keenly aware of my privilege. Now the question remains…how do I use my privilege appropriately to empower them? How do I negate the problems of their world? How do I try to use a virtual classroom to equalize them in some way? And the most important question of all… is this even remotely possible? How do I make my classroom a safe space again? (Journal 4–20).

In questioning privilege, Lavina's internal position of "I am an educator" is conflicted, in dialogue, and counter positioned with the external positions i.e., views held (the educator) of students especially those lacking equity. Her Self- I position is conflicted and despairing in the in-between spatial temporality of the virtual classroom, as it is constantly questioned, negotiated, and forced to acknowledge the situatedness of her students in the virtual environment. The resolution of the I-position can take place when the circumstances of students or when the students "locate" the educator differently. While the identity as an educator remains the same, the voice of the I-position is marginalized.

DISCUSSION

Two educators, two distinct narratives. One hope-filled another of disillusionment and despair. While some findings may not be unique, it did reinforce for us what we have known in the abstract, that students of color often lack the resources for an empowering education and that neoliberal systems favor those with economic means. We do not wish to deny or minimize the huge differences in opportunities that exist amongst students. When students were on campus, it lessened to a certain extent their differences in equity and access to technology, a virtual environment on the other hand exacerbated and amplified those differences.

The Embodiment of Care

As researchers and practitioners, we found ourselves examining the embodied nature of care and how it manifests in online virtual environments since care is situated at the center of most, if not all, of our moral, ethical, or professional responsibilities as educators. Some have taken a critical stance and emphasized the need for society to equalize the private and public ways in which care is divided into labor and the implications of gender (Held, 1990; Ruddick, 1998; Kittay, 1999). As our private and academic worlds collided, we had to adjust our understandings of identity and care. Noddings (2012) explained, "In an encounter or sequence of encounters that can be appropriately called caring, one party acts as a carer and the other as cared-for. Over time in equal relations, the parties regularly exchange positions. Adult caring relations exhibit this mutuality" (p. 771–772).

We recognized that both independent and interrelated moments of meaning-making unfold in face to face and virtual classrooms, albeit differently. These have potential implications for curriculum redesign and equitable education. We observed and experienced first-hand the importance of being more explicit in online virtual classroom environments. Care practices

also unfolded communally. Through care-based pedagogical practices, teachers could make a positive difference for students, through daily practice whether face to face or in online virtual classrooms. We question what care-based practices look like in virtual classroom environments? It translates into increasing students' motivation and commitment to improving their sense of confidence for a subject, willingness to try challenging tasks, and engagement in aspects of learning they don't like. Care was the vehicle for relationship development and maintenance in many ways, and relationships formed a context for learning in the classroom community, simply moved to an online virtual environment.

Intersectional Identities and Dialogical Selves

The implications of individual and collective intersectional identities and the complicated nature of privilege and power relations became more obvious in the virtual classroom. Additionally, our selves were in constant dialogue due to "… internal and external positions meet(ing) in processes of negotiation, cooperation, opposition, conflict, agreement and disagreement" (Hermans, 2001, p. 253). We problematized what counts as knowledge and our role as faculty, as "producers of knowledge" (Giroux, 2016). We looked at this through the lens of care, showing empathy and compassion for our students, yet how to care for students became complicated by the limitations of equity. Sadly, we did not arrive at a point during online virtual instruction to address or unpack the culture of commodification in education. Quietly we reflected upon on the possible effects of recording our classes and the negative impact this potentially had on student participation. Ethically, we recognized that students often raise morally charged questions and share very personal and emotionally charged experiences that we as educators promise to ensure their anonymity and our impartiality. As educators, we asked ourselves how to best preserve this stance in the classroom when the virtual class session is recorded and can be replayed and kept for future evaluation? At the start of each semester and the beginning of each class we provided and review with our students the rules of engagement, a set of guidelines to ensure confidentiality and that all classroom community members understood the need for trust and compassion; this specific aspect of setting up classroom community was a delicate balance to strike amidst the reality of video-recorded sessions. Further, we often felt unable to apply the practices of care for our students consistently enough to make a significant difference. For example, in future classes, Charity plans to review the steps to follow in the event of any unwanted intrusions, simply to make students aware that while unlikely, this reality can be minimized and avoided. Furthermore, both Charity and Lavina will plan for more time, engagement, and trust to explore these topics together in the future. Rice et al. (2019) words reminded us of the charge:

> every dimension of a research project is an opportunity to work toward social justice. Intersectionality deals with the complexity and messiness of lives, relationships, structures, and societies, so data collection and analysis methods must be responsive to contexts and serve liberatory objectives. Thus, in our view, the

animating consideration for critical researchers in undertaking intersectional research is one of continuously and unequivocally interrogating at every stage of the process, "Am I doing justice?" (p. 420).

Although we acknowledge that we looked at issues of students' equity from the lens of justice (What is just and what is right), our intersectional identities as educators led us to engage in the relational work of teaching that affected key aspects of our pedagogical instruction such as the implementation of care-based practices, planning curriculum and implementing lessons that address equity, and assessing student work with due consideration to their unique life circumstances. Given the nature of the relational work associated with teaching and learning between teachers and students, ethics and pedagogy are naturally intertwined (Campbell, 2008). As we tried to take into account the needs of our students from diverse backgrounds, we had to ultimately see past our self-interests and emphasize theirs.

Moving to a virtual classroom due to COVID-19, amplified, and complicated the meanings and understandings of Self and our identities as professors and researchers. This was in part due to the construction, reconstruction, and negotiation of our Selves as were located and situated by our students in multiple ways. A recurring trend emerged in which it was observed that in face to face classrooms the ability to humanize oneself facilitated a sense of camaraderie and equality between teacher-student; thus, reducing the power dynamics and structural constraints in the classroom. This was much more challenging to enact in every online session in the virtual classroom. In the temporal space of the virtual classroom, we were all learners situated and uniquely positioned by our experiences, yet our students of color were less receptive and less comfortable in sharing of themselves. Early reflections revealed an attempt to "honor how people learn first and foremost" (Charity, Journal 3–20). However, by the end, everyone was tired, tapped out, challenged, and the key takeaway rested on the reality that virtual learning was exhausting. Ultimately, Charity reflected that:

> This experience has increased my respect for how much goes into the instructional design to use technology more seamlessly, and how important it is to tailor everything to my students' needs. As a community of learners, we regularly reflected on what worked and what needed to be changed. This focus on taking the time to apply what we have learned, and continually working to improve ourselves (Journal, 6–20).

As for Lavina, she shared,

> I empathize with my students, coming from a minority background myself, I understand what my students feel. I sense their powerlessness especially when I know that I am not so different from them. But I believe that marginalizing experiences have the potential to be a powerful tool for empowerment and change. And so, I will continue trying to engage and understand (Journal 6–20).

As the internal positions of the dialogical self become relevant (I am a person of empathy) due to the connections it has with

the external positions of student perceptions (located by student powerlessness), we need to explicitly account for dialogue that is focused on care to better engage our students in the virtual environment. In empathizing with our students about their unique circumstances, we became more aware of our Selves and how it impacted our identities and our students' ways of being.

Implications for the Teaching Profession

Caring for students is critical work, and the toll it takes on teachers is ever increasing during uncertain times. As policy mandates send teachers back into schools across the United States to engage with students in a variety of classroom settings and scenarios, including hybrid and hy-flex models of face to face and virtual learning environments, the last 6 months demonstrates the determination and commitment of teachers to creatively address learning issues and the emotional needs of students. Supporting students is an integral responsibility of educators as is the role of collaboration and dialogue with other faculty becoming even more essential in virtual spaces. The relational and humanizing elements highlighted in this study were necessary on many levels, including pedagogically. The ethic of care can be seen exhibited between educators and students, students with one another, and amongst educators to promote self-care. The COVID-19 pandemic sheds a spotlight on many limitations within the educational structures regarding both the ethic of care for students as well as self-care practices for educators. For example, educators who might have prior found the physical separation between school and home helpful for setting boundaries, increasingly struggled more during COVID-19 with the blurring of teaching responsibilities and family duties at home. Working remotely requires more self-regulation amongst teachers and educators to stop, turn off the computer, walk away from emails and texts from students, families, and colleagues. Ed Week reported how teachers spend their time has changed dramatically, with an 87 percent increase of time spent troubleshooting technology problems and a 71 percent decrease in student instruction and engagement, 69 percent less time presenting new material, 61 percent less time engaged in enrichment with students, and 40 percent less time spent doing review (Herold, 2020). Truancy figures were much higher in high-poverty districts, higher amongst older students than younger students, and yet truancy rates are lower across the board for schools in which there is at least one device for every student. Similarly, most districts are faced with the challenges of reopening with little or no financial assistance from the government to order and provide proper personal protective equipment (PPE), cleaning, professional development for virtual teaching, or staffing models that support proper distancing between teachers and students. Reopening contingency plans at many levels fail to properly fund health protection measures for teachers and students, fund devices for students in need, or plan and account for the need for guidance and support to implement virtual learning long-term should the need extend beyond a soft opening for schools at the start of the academic year. Further, the ethic of care and self-care are integral to sustain effective learning communities and yet both are being grossly ignored in the United States, sparking lawsuits between teachers' unions and governors. Most educational institutions over-rely on teachers' sense of care for their students to make up the difference for a lack of proper resources necessary to provide safe and effective education during the pandemic.

Just as during the shutdown, there will continue to be a wide spectrum of resources available for virtual instruction depending on teachers' contexts. Some districts, teachers, and students engaged utilizing state of the art technology, while other districts were faced with sending home photocopied packets of work to students, and some districts shut down altogether. Little has changed for educators: Teachers are ultimately responsible for being responsive to another individual's needs, not simply in the context of a solitary individual at a time, such as in the case of psychologists or counselors. By contrast, teachers are typically providing direct care for 20 or more individuals daily for upwards of 10 months in a given year. Like other helping professionals, the toll taken for providing individualized care can be daunting and taxing for the care provider. This suggests that given the realities of teaching being a caring profession, perhaps more time needs to be devoted to pre-service and practicing teacher's development of self-compassion as a practice and avoiding burnout, and advocacy skills to secure the resources and support necessary to make teaching virtually a successful enterprise. Mor Barak et al. (2001) found that burnout is often related to the level of inexperience and is also associated with workers who tend toward perfectionism or generally high standards and ethics for the care of clients, in teachers' cases, toward students. In higher education, the vast majority of teachers serve in adjunct positions and/or lack union representation; receiving pedagogical guidance varies across institutions, and professional development related to juggling how to best juggle completing priorities such as research, publishing, grant writing, curriculum development, and g the consuming nature of teaching students.

In the teaching profession, educators at all levels are often most isolated from one another, and school cultures often fail to provide counseling services to help cope with the daily stressors associated with working in a caring profession. Teaching in online and virtual classrooms are no exception. Teaching "at home" further blurs the lines between professional and personal responsibilities. As Neff and Germer (2013) explained, in caring professions, compassion must be applied as a healthy attitude toward oneself and a strong sense of one's strengths and limitations. Neff and Germer (2013) posited that self-compassion is comprised by (a) a mindfulness or being open and present to one's suffering, (b) self-kindness, and (c) a recognition of the common experience of suffering inherent in the human experience applies to oneself first and foremost. Helping teachers to navigate the boundaries between personal and professional care would help alleviate the often-gray area of when to stop, hold back, even simply to practice better self-care to serve as a more effective caregiver.

Little is legislated for teacher's self-care. Union advocacy in this area is restricted historically to hours worked and the number of students allowed in a classroom with one teacher, and this is further delineated only in public schools. Only recently are practices such as meditation, yoga, and physical exercise encouraged or mandated, and primarily for the betterment of

students. The advantages of prioritization of such practices in schools for teachers are numerous.

CONCLUSION

Indeed, there is growing social awareness of inequities and lack of opportunities created by educational disadvantage for students of color. We acknowledge to be transformative is to have a sense of how we come to "be," how interactions shape each other's identity. Our identities and positionalities as educators shifted as we found ourselves being constantly located by the students in the virtual environment sometimes in marginalizing ways. Our Selves and intersectional identities as educators interacted within ourselves (in the society of the mind) and with the other (our students) extending into the environment causing us to question our pedagogical practices and how best to empower our students.

There are many lessons to be learned in the messiness of adapting through the COVID-19 crisis. We further acknowledge that while our virtual classroom revealed profound disparities in our students' access to support and opportunities, it also made us question the effectiveness of our pedagogical practices and pushed us to reconsider what caring pedagogy looks like, sounds like, and how care may be experienced differently in a virtual classroom. We asked ourselves in what ways could we be more responsive to the needs of our students of color and make pedagogical adjustments to help these students be as involved and active as in face to face classrooms. We also noticed the need to rethink strategies to close the learning gap on many levels that extend beyond the classroom. Educational institutions and telecommunication companies can help work together with educators and administrators to eliminate the underlying issue of students' lack of digital access. No doubt that

budgets are being slashed and economic uncertainty reigns in our current context, but funding initiatives are necessary to ensure all students have the technological tools to access learning. When will the United States of America as a nation and a society be willing and ready to take a hard look at the policies and funding issues associated with making education and equity priorities for current and future generations of students? Similarly, other countries too have had their education systems compromised by COVID-19. It is likely that educators from around the world worry about these same issues raised since it has enormous implications for student learning and best teaching practices. While the answers are not easy, as educators, we assert that the educational community should not wait until the next crisis to respond to inequities and issues of disenfranchisement. We are at a crossroads and it is time to reflect together and then to act.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The raw data supporting the conclusions of this article will be made available by the authors, without undue reservation.

ETHICS STATEMENT

The studies involving human participants were reviewed and approved by Felician University Institutional Review Board. The patients/participants provided their written informed consent to participate in this study.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

All authors listed have made a substantial, direct and intellectual contribution to the work, and approved it for publication.

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