Reforming Our School Systems Around a Humanizing Curriculum: Schooling During and After COVID-19

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Highlights

- The COVID-19 pandemic provides an opportunity to create new school systems that are centered around a humanizing curriculum.
- A humanizing curriculum values self, social, and cultural knowledge in addition to academic knowledge, celebrating students as whole human beings who are learning about and creating their place in society.
- This curriculum is co-created and co-implemented with students and families.
- Through this co-creation and co-implementation process, we shift school systems to support a humanizing curriculum.

Keywords

Families, humanizing curriculum, student-centered, system reform

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We are in the middle of a global education crisis. This year, the Year of the Rat, is truly a time of great change and precarity. Millions of children were denied school for much of the spring, and, for
many educators and families, the fall has proven to be unpredictable as well. As educators, we rushed to provide our students with the best we could in the spring as the COVID-19 crisis reared its head and took over our lives. We were helped, in this process, by families, who despite certain inherent constraints stepped up and took over some of the load that teachers typically carry. We created action and contingency plans for this fall. Yet we are challenged daily by problems with online, hybrid, and in-person instruction and by the continuing uncertainty that we and our students’ families face.

The summer gave us space to ask ourselves difficult questions about what our students truly need both right now (in this moment before a vaccine is widely available) and years from now, when our children become leaders in this world. These questions are value-laden, drawing on our morality, our civic duty, our critical and compassionate reflection, and our ability to create solutions that benefit humanity broadly (Mary Lou Fulton Teachers College, Arizona State University, 2019).

We argue that, as educators, confronting a future we cannot fully predict, we need to address two key questions: (a) What do we want our students to learn? and (b) How do we create systems that provide them with opportunities to learn?

These are not new questions. In fact, one could argue that these are fundamental questions that educators need to confront on a regular basis. The current crisis has forced us to dig deeper and not just ask these questions but also try to design systemic responses that address these concerns in an intentional, thoughtful, organic manner. And maybe, from the chaos and disruption, we can create a new humanizing curriculum that encompasses not just learners, teachers, and schools but families as well.

This emphasis on families is long overdue. The disruptions caused by schools’ closing abruptly thrust families to be at the center of their children’s learning. Children could not learn from their teachers as they had done in the past, nor from their peers. This shift makes us question our current models of schooling, the curriculum we currently provide and the systems that support this curriculum.

**Our current curriculum and school systems**

Our current curriculum is based on academic standards set by experts in education and content areas (e.g., mathematicians or mathematics educators). In the U.S., as elsewhere, these benchmarks were established with the best of intentions, emerging from a realization that we needed clear standards that would apply uniformly across multiple contexts, because, in our desegregated public school systems, the quality of education that children received varied greatly by their race and zip code. For instance, if you lived in a poor neighborhood or state, or if you were a Black or Brown
child, you were more likely to receive a subpar education. Thus, these standards were created to ensure all children would receive the same level of high-quality education.

Actual implementation, however, often did not match these noble intentions. Many school systems were not ready to provide all children with such an education, and many state departments of education and teacher and administrator preparation programs were ill-prepared to support school systems with the changes. Educators had to create ambitious new systems from their underfunded organizations that existed within an ecology of systemically discriminatory institutions. Simultaneously, they risked losing federal funding if students did not perform well on high-stakes tests, which were the only measure of accountability.

It was not surprising, therefore, that most school systems ended up creating a highly standardized, one-size-fits-all curriculum that ignored the fact each child has unique talents and interests. These curricula treated learners as being interchangeable units that moved in lockstep through a series of developmental stages determined by age. It is increasingly clear that this “one-size-fits-all,” age-driven curriculum does not work, ignoring as it does the greatest strength that children bring to the learning environment—their individuality.

This is because there is no such thing as an average student or average child (Rose, 2016). Students, as all humans, come with “jagged profiles,” average along some dimensions but uniquely configured along others. Some of these “jagged” characteristics are individual, such as talents and interests, but some are contextual, such as those determined by their familial, cultural, and community contexts.

This approach, that squishes individual and cultural variability, has an added negative fallout. Driven as it is by a highly standardized curriculum, this approach frames learning as occurring just within the four walls of the school. It devalues and delegitimizes the specific and rich expertise and knowledge that families teach their children, thus ignoring the unique familial, cultural, and community knowledge and experiences that children possess. Highly standardized curricula decontextualize knowledge, removing it from its rich history and context, and denying the richest natural resource, the uninvested capital of the child’s individual and cultural heritage.

Changing this now deeply entrenched system is hard. But it can be argued that we have a unique opportunity handed to us by the pandemic. The disruption of all levels of education may provide us with a chance to revisit these issues, with a somewhat clean slate to come up with better solutions.

We argue that key to any solution is the development of a humanizing curriculum—a curriculum that values not just academic knowledge but also self-, social, and cultural knowledge. Additionally, that this curriculum ought to be co-created and co-implemented with learners and families.
A humanizing curriculum

Most curricula aim to teach children the knowledge and skills needed to be productive and flourishing citizens in their societies. This typically includes academic, sociocultural, emotional, and civic knowledge. We believe that, in addition, curricula should leverage students’ existing knowledge, experiences, and interests (Moll et al., 1992; Paris & Alim, 2017; Yosso, 2005). Schools are not places where adults pour knowledge into children’s minds. Rather, schools are places where children learn more about themselves and the world, are transformed by this learning and, in turn, seek to transform it (Freire, 1970; Ladson-Billings, 1995).

Building on humanizing pedagogy, a humanizing curriculum is one that seeks out and celebrates students’ experiences as whole human beings who are learning about and creating their place in their society (Freire, 1970; Ladson-Billings, 1995). A humanizing curriculum sees and supports the humanity and dignity of each student, each teacher, and each human being, and encourages students and teachers to leverage their self- and community knowledge to transform their world (Freire, 1970; Ladson-Billings, 1995; Salazar, 2013). A humanizing curriculum is, by definition, based on students’ individual and collective experiences as human beings in the world seeking to leverage their rich, uniquely personal “jagged profiles,” as opposed seeing them as an undifferentiated average. Thus, a humanizing curriculum is a customized curriculum for each classroom, school, school system, and, most importantly, each learner (Freire, 1970; Salazar, 2013; Veloria & Boyes-Watson, 2014).

Clearly, such a curriculum cannot be imposed top-down. It has to be, instead, co-created by students, teachers, and other adults working together (Freire, 1970; Love, 2019; Salazar, 2013; Taylor, 2019; Veloria & Boyes-Watson, 2014). Though student–teacher relationships, founded on reciprocal trust and care, are at the heart of a humanizing curriculum (Freire, 1970; Love, 2019; Salazar, 2013; Taylor, 2019; Veloria & Boyes-Watson, 2014), we need to also recognize that this relationship is situated within a broader community of practice that connects them to other students, families, the school, and the broader community. Students, in this context, are at the center of decision-making, while teachers respectfully suggest, guide, and validate students, creating opportunities for the learners to learn and grow. Thus, they help students build on their prior knowledge and preferences to take ownership of their own learning and find their own voice (Ladson-Billings, 1995; Love, 2019; Moll et al., 1992; Paris & Alim, 2017; Yosso, 2005). Teachers take an asset-based approach, seeing students as highly capable, holding them to high expectations, and encouraging each student to see themselves and others as both unique and capable (Love, 2019; Salazar, 2013). A humanizing curriculum, thus, is responsive to the uniqueness of each learner—to their jagged profile as it were—and hence designed to ensure all students have equitable access to it.
While we call for a humanizing curriculum as an evolution from a standards-based curriculum, we see its power during the current pandemic and beyond. A humanizing curriculum is simultaneously responsive to the trauma students may be experiencing right now and the life celebrations that can go unnoticed. Similarly, it is responsive to the trauma fellow humans are experiencing in our communities, in our countries, and across our world while also celebrating successes, such as positive social changes and new scientific discoveries.

More importantly, we believe that this argument for a humanizing curriculum is not just restricted to the urgency of this specific educational (pandemic) context and crisis. In fact, we argue that the idea of a humanizing curriculum is significant beyond this current crisis and is valuable in and of itself, by fostering reflection on how we (as educators and learners) relate to others and ourselves as social and cultural beings.

Critics of such an approach, even while lauding its lofty goals, may argue that something like this could never be implemented. A humanizing curriculum sounds lovely, they may argue, but how do we ensure all of our students also master international standards of literacy and numeracy through leveraging their passions? We argue that this is a false dichotomy. As Berliner (2020) recently wrote:

> So to all the worried parents, teachers, and school administrators concerned that our youth will not learn about gerunds and the role of apostrophes, or long division and simple algebra, or the date the constitution was signed, “on time,” relax! Let us instead make sure our children are learning though [sic] projects and topics that capture their fancy during the time they have open. That should more than suffice for what they might miss of the traditional curriculum.

A humanizing curriculum draws on both standardized academic knowledge and students’ social and cultural knowledge as resources for learning (Moll et al., 1992; Salazar, 2013; Yosso, 2005). It acknowledges that, more than standards, students, families, and educators want a loving, caring, connected learning experience that helps students develop and grow in ways that are responsive to their experiences, needs, and interests (Love, 2019).

Co-creating the curriculum with families

How can school and district leaders shift their systems to support this vision of a humanizing, culturally responsive curriculum, particularly in a context where educators are struggling to address the challenges forced upon them by the pandemic?

We believe that it may be easier to shift existing school systems to support a humanizing curriculum at this point in history more than ever before. We suggest this in part because this context allows us to involve families, and the sociocultural capital they bring to the table. This pandemic has ensured that families are already involved in the educational process,
because school, in the spring, took place in kitchens, living rooms, and cars (Sampson et al., 2020). The ongoing pandemic ensures that many families will continue full online schooling in the fall.

We see families as being an untapped resource with great potential to transform what learning can be and what it should look like. We can co-create a humanizing curriculum with students and their families, one that utilizes student-centered pedagogy, is interdisciplinary, and leverages innovative instructional strategies, such as inquiry-based or project-based learning, driven by student interests, talents, and passions. It is important in this context to note that though our conceptualization of a humanizing curriculum has some significant commonalities with a student-centered curriculum, our approach goes further by foregrounding the broader context within which the learner is embedded, namely by being inclusive of the family and the broader social and cultural context as important mediators of how we conceptualize learning.

Such a process takes advantage of the professional knowledge and expertise that teachers possess as well as the rich knowledge and interests children bring to class every day (Moll et al., 1992; Paris & Alim, 2017; Yosso, 2005). Families as partners can work with professional educators to support children with thoughtfully and intentionally designed projects.

Co-creating a curriculum with families is also more humanizing for families (Ishimaru, 2020; Moll et al., 1992; Paris & Alim, 2017; Sampson et al., 2020) along multiple dimensions. 

First, it recognizes that families are more than capable of helping local educators create more equitable schooling systems. Families know their children. Families often see what we cannot. Families know which solutions might work. They can be valuable partners in decision-making if we allow them to be at the table.

Second, co-creating a curriculum with families leverages families’ areas of expertise, connecting children to the vast amounts of knowledge their family members possess (Moll et al., 1992; Yosso, 2005). A humanizing curriculum values families as fellow educators and resources of knowledge (Salazar, 2013), expanding the resources for learning beyond school walls.

Third, co-creating a humanizing curriculum recognizes the trauma and anxiety families are experiencing and provides opportunities to both process the trauma and exercise some control by digging into human issues that are simultaneously local and global. A humanizing curriculum is based on mutual respect and care among students, families, and educators.

Fourth, schooling has always been a shared responsibility with families, and it is even more so now. In fact, now we have an opportunity to connect schooling even more closely with families’ daily experiences. For instance, creating a family schedule, cooking meals, researching family histories, and researching who used to live on the land you live on are activities full of academic, sociocultural, emotional, and civic knowledge.

Fifth, inquiry- and project-based learning centered on a humanizing curriculum is easier for families to manage than keeping up with a multitude of daily lessons in multiple subject areas with multiple
teachers, with most assignments disconnected from each other. Instead, inquiry- or project-based learning opportunities allow families to help their children bring multiple knowledges to bear on a social issue of local or global importance, allowing time to dig deeply and design potential solutions. 

Finally, and importantly, co-creating a curriculum with students and families addresses a major challenge with system reforms: shifting people’s understandings and expectations about what schooling should look like (Wong, 2020). We know that one of the reasons systems are difficult to change is because we all have change-resistant culturally separated mental maps (Scott, 2014) about how schooling is done and what it is supposed to look like (Cuban, 1993). Often unintentionally, we revert to the way we are used to doing things and foil our own efforts to change. To drastically change institutions of schooling requires changing the cultural-cognitive understandings of billions of people, most importantly students, families, and educators. We can address this challenge by co-creating with families new expectations for what schooling looks like and the expectations and roles everyone plays in making the shifts happen.

We recognize that there are many challenges facing such a vision of a humanizing curriculum—not the least of which is institutional inertia, variation (socioeconomic, educational attainment, and more) in how families and communities may view the role of schooling and education and their sense of agency in that space. There are also existing chasms of power and authority over funding and budgets that may get in the way of the kinds of genuine collaboration and conversations that we need to have.

Co-creating and systemically supporting a humanizing curriculum with students and families requires ongoing communication (Sampson et al., 2020), as all strong partnerships do, because this would be an iterative process, with educators, students, and families regularly assessing how learning is going and improving their efforts in response to their assessment (Ishimaru, 2020). Most local educators and families do not have existing strong lines of communication to draw on. This is an opportunity to build and strengthen communication with families, something students, families, local educators, researchers, and policymakers have long called for (Ishimaru, 2020).

**Conclusion**

We argue for co-creating, with children and their families, a humanizing curriculum and, in this process, shifting school systems to support this curriculum. When we think about the well-being of children and their families during this coming school year, we can only imagine a curriculum that nurtures children as whole beings and leverages their interests to make sense of this new world unfolding in front of them. We can only imagine school systems set up to help children find their place in this world in order to improve it. We cannot imagine doing anything less. We believe we have been handed an opportunity as educators, families, and citizens to change
how we think about schooling and learning, and it behooves us to take advantage of this opportunity.

**Contributorship**

Lok-Sze Wong led the conceptualization and writing of this manuscript, collaborating with Punya Mishra throughout the entire process.

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**Note**

1. Following common definitions, we define curriculum as the body of knowledge and skills to be learned, and we define pedagogy as approaches and methods used to teach.

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