

A VISION FOR A MORE EQUITABLE FUTURE

Dean David Chard discusses 2020's impact on education and human development, and how to move forward

BY MARA SASSOON



spring, as the COVID-19 pandemic spread and schools closed, educators rushed to transfer learning experiences to Zoom and Google Classroom, while parents scrambled to teach *and* work. Many families lacked access to childcare, didn't have internet access or a laptop, missed needed school meals, and lost their incomes.

The pandemic's initial convulsions might be over, but more than six months later, we're still in the thick of it, with millions of kids learning at home or only in school for a few hours each day; many of the glaring inequalities highlighted in COVID's first wave remain. And it's all playing out in a year of reckoning over systemic racism,



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spotlighted by protests against police violence toward people of color. The events of 2020 rattled the fields of education and human development, and in doing so, exposed deep cracks in their foundations.

BU Wheelock spoke with Dean David Chard to discuss takeaways from the year and what the future of education and human development should look like, from providing better support for families to revamping schools' K–12 curriculum.

***BU Wheelock:* While this has been an exceptionally difficult year, it's also exposed many issues that have long been present in education and human development. What are some of the issues you saw highlighted this year?**

Chard: Probably one of the most significant issues that has been revealed is that parents and communities have different kinds of relationships with schools. The pandemic has revealed to us that low-income communities in particular—and most of those are disproportionately represented by communities of color—don't have as close of a relationship with their schools. As a result, schools don't know much about them. They don't know what their stu-

dents' access to the internet is like, for example. When it came time to figure out how to communicate next steps, they didn't know anything about how to go about it. They didn't know how to make that shift to remote teaching and learning very swiftly. Even within a district like Boston Public Schools (BPS), it often came down to who was the leader of a particular school, because there were school leaders who were prepared for this and had forged relationships with their families. But there were many who had not. That says something about the way we think about quality education for marginalized groups.

Another major fault line is that we have not adequately provided for the care of children and families—their nutrition, mental health, physical health. And during this pandemic, people haven't had places to turn for help in those areas. The overlay of that with police violence, and the ongoing symptoms of systemic racism, has magnified and exacerbated the problem, and has left people vulnerable in so many ways. The people who have been hurt the most are the people who had the least to begin with.

What does a more ideal, equitable future of education look like?

That's a big question. First, we have to expect more of education systems. We've grown reliant on a very traditional brick-and-mortar approach to education because it served multiple purposes. It gave parents a way to go to work by providing a space for children to learn, grow, and develop. So it was historically intimately linked to our economic livelihood.

That has to change. We have to understand that children learn wherever they are, whether they're with a teacher, with each other, or with a caregiver of some sort. The pandemic has blown up the traditional model of education, and I don't think we'll fully go back to that model. There's a lot of innovation that has to be done. We've got these great technological tools and now we've become incredibly reliant on them, but how do you really learn through them, without necessarily being in a classroom or lab, touching things? We've not quite figured that out. There's still a lot of work that has to be done, but now is the time.

Another element of this—and this really is the intersection of some of the social justice issues highlighted by the pandemic—is the system we've always had was designed to drive large numbers of people through smaller and smaller filters, until we take a test to get into college. I really do believe that people are going to start saying, "Where did that get us?" We have wasted a lot of talent and we've seen a lot of people not have opportunities because of those filters. That's another thing we're going to have to spend a lot of time rethinking.

Do you see that happening down the line, getting rid of those filters?

We're starting to already see it in terms of higher ed. When I was president at Wheelock College, we stopped requiring the SAT. There's a movement afoot to say that those standardized tests are

just one data point. Is it meaningless? No. But, is it as meaningful as we’ve made it out to be? Certainly not. So, the question is, how do you get better information about students that is more interesting and helpful?

Education is one of the most traditional fields. There’s a lot of work to do, and this pause is giving us some sense of where we need to begin to change policies. The predominant number of people who teach in schools are white women, for example. And we now know that if you get teachers who look more like the kids they’re teaching, you actually get better outcomes.

We have to figure out how to make teaching more appealing to a broader demographic of people. Part of the way we want to do that at BU is by opening up the curriculum so that people have a chance to see all of the connections to teaching. Education is just one part of what our school does. There may be a lot more BU students out there who would find our work appealing and would be drawn to it if it wasn’t so narrow, if they had a chance to really engage in the City of Boston, get to know people, and understand how communities function and what their role could be within that picture.

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So the pandemic was kind of the nudge that was needed?

It wasn’t just a nudge—it was a slap in the face.

How can our society, and our schools in particular, better support families in educating children?

According to federal data, children spend about 14 percent of their time in school. Only 14 percent. So, why do we give schools such importance? I think the way schools might think about this “new school” idea is their linkage to nonprofits, after school programs, faith-based organizations—whatever it happens to be—where they can find families and develop relationships with those families.

In some ways, it’s an opportunity for schools to think more fundamentally about their job and not assume they’re everything, because kids don’t spend the majority of their time in school. They’re out doing other things, but most schools do not have relationships with those other things. It’s really important that those relationships exist and happen.

At BU Wheelock, we’ve started that by identifying some Boston-based nonprofits like the Boston Debate League, and 826 Boston, which is a writing program for kids in some of the high schools in Boston. They’re very strong nonprofits, and in most cases, they are working inside the schools. So BPS is clearly doing this. They understand that they can have a greater impact on children and families if they’re involved in a larger chunk of their life. We’re likely to see schools do more of that.

Times of crisis often give birth to innovation. Have you seen any examples of innovation in education during the pandemic?

It’s a little bit early to say what kind of innovation has come out of the pandemic and what’s going to stick around. We’re still in it. In some cases, it’s made further use of what was innovative. Zoom was hardly this powerful before the pandemic. Now, I have conversations with people in South Africa, Australia, and all over the place. Innovation in education has been a very slow process. We’re much more likely to invest in the development of video games than we are to invest in the development of educational games or educational tools. This may change that.

We also have researchers at BU Wheelock who have been toying with the use of simulation software—for teacher training, for example. That has become much more serious because one other cumulative thing with the pandemic is we have a major teacher shortage. Frankly, we have a teacher crisis in the United States. There is a great need to train teachers. Now, we’re using simulation software for student teaching opportunities.

How does this year change what we teach our children? There have been a lot of calls for schools to revamp their history curriculum, for instance.

Yes, there needs to be change. If you follow history education in the United States—almost anywhere in the world, really—it’s whoever is in power who gets to decide what gets taught. I lived and taught in southern Africa during the end of the apartheid era and it was amazing that what all kids were taught was a complete falsification

of history. But, it served the power structure. And, of course, that’s what happened here. We whitewashed history in the United States.

As far as pedagogical changes, in an area like literature, we need to expand our understanding of what good literature is and read a broader cross section of authors, moving away from the traditional canonical way of thinking—not that the canon is all bad, but there are a lot of great authors who children don’t get exposed to early on.

We also need to rethink what it is schools really need to teach. Teachers should ask, “Why am I teaching this content?” We have so much access to knowledge, with Google and such, and that’s only going to get better. The focus should be more on how do you teach students to be able to interpret knowledge, contextualize it, and analyze it critically. How do you teach people to use that information that is so readily available? That’s what schools have not done. State by state, we have 50 sets of standards that are very, frankly, 1980s. They’re looking backward and not forward. I hope the pandemic will accelerate change.

Has this year inspired any reimaging of courses that are taught at BU Wheelock?

Oh, yes. We were actually moving in this direction before the pandemic, but we will be eliminating all of our undergraduate majors. We are proposing a single undergraduate major that will be called Education and Human Development. It is designed to give students who are interested in human service work—teaching, child life, counseling, etc.—a chance to sample content and experiences more broadly across the University, which will help shape their understanding of how one serves in these roles. That will hopefully be in effect next fall.

Right now, if you come to BU and you want to be a math teacher, first of all, you have to know that you want to be a math teacher, and then you take a very regimented curriculum to do so. With the single major, we want to give students two years to be in Boston serving in organizations, nonprofits, and social service agencies to really understand how they work and the issues they tackle. Then, by year three, they begin to make a decision about an area they want to pursue, but are well informed about its history and landscape.

We’re looking at what makes teachers effective. We know now that it is as important to be good at relationship building as it is to be a master of your content knowledge. That requires teachers to practice relationship building. How do you get to know the parents of your students? If parents don’t know their children’s teachers, then how likely is it they’re going to communicate with them about the needs of their children?

We’re also looking at some significant changes at the graduate level. Our faculty are developing a proposal for a master’s degree in antiracism in pedagogy.

And we’re also rethinking our early childhood education programs to be more community oriented and transdisciplinary. Families interact with community health centers, faith-based organizations, shopping centers, and all kinds of nonprofit organizations, and we don’t prepare early childhood leaders to think about—if they’re going to run a prekindergarten center in BPS, for instance—what they need to know about the community around them and

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how they utilize the resources of that community to maximize the impact of their prekindergarten work.

None of these ideas and issues are unique to the pandemic, but when you layer on everything we’ve experienced this year, it really does raise a lot of important questions about how we move forward.

What are some causes for optimism that we can take from this year?

The pandemic has illuminated our interdependence, and shown us it could be our lifeblood, but it could also be our detriment if we can’t learn how to work together.

I think if we, as a society, throw ourselves behind some of our other major problems, like systemic racism and climate change, with such vigor, it would be interesting to see what we could accomplish.

The pandemic is also, thankfully, opening up our eyes to really intersectional issues in education. For example, in my field of special education, people have said for years that children of color are overrepresented. In fact, it’s not exactly true. In some communities with a predominantly white population, children of color are disproportionately identified as having disabilities. But, in communities with a higher percentage of people of color, they’re underrepresented in special education, and some students are missing out on services that they would need. So, in one instance they are probably not needing the services, but are wrongly identified, based on their race or ethnicity, as needing them. In another setting, they’re not being identified, and they’re not getting the services that would help them. This year in particular is causing us to look more carefully and thoughtfully at such issues.

I think in our darkest days during this pandemic, many of us felt like things couldn’t get better. But, I think people now have a sense of urgency that is motivating some really exciting changes. So, my hope is back. 