I have been in education for 30 years, and I continue to marvel at the opportunities that I get to learn and grow, provided I am in a mental and emotional space to do so. Such was the case on Saturday, May 15, as I awoke to do my daily Devotions, overlooking Fresh Pond in Cambridge.

My daily devotional time is an opportunity for me to show gratitude as well as center myself in who God is in my life, and what I am being called to do that day, as well as days to come. Over the years I have disciplined myself to use this time as a filter through which the rest of the day must pass through. My thinking? If I start the day with a faith filter, I am more inclined to experience the day in the way that I am called to, as opposed to simply how “I” want to experience it.

In retrospect, I marvel at the power of that centering because, that Saturday in May, I read something on social media that — in the delicate world of academia — “triggered” me. After doing my devotion, my attention was drawn to a Facebook post by one of my former Ed School doctoral students, Cheryl Camacho, Ed.L.D.’19. (She welcomes the attention here.) Cheryl is a system-level leader in South Bend, Indiana, where she oversees five schools, 2,100 students, and hundreds of faculty and staff. In her Facebook post, Cheryl was expressing her personal and professional concern.

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about the recent spate of “returning to school” blueprints that were being published by various think tanks, former practitioners, and thought leaders. Since I was one of the former practitioners that contributed to a blueprint put out by the American Enterprise Institute, I read this post with heightened interest — and in angst.

Cheryl’s thoughtful but candid treatise can be summarized in her own words: What I really want and need, as someone who is responsible for the safety and education of 2,000 kids, is some thought partnership that respects and takes into consideration the specific needs of my families and staff. What I heard in this statement was a desire for those of us in leadership to listen and hear those “in the trenches” who are currently doing the work of educating and leading America’s 50 million children, even as they lead, teach, and support their own households.

While I gave a response that defended the role that thought leaders and former practitioners might play as we plan to reopen school, I acknowledged the need for more listening on our parts. And, I said as much in my response to Cheryl. What resulted was the trigger: I spent the week of March 18, 2020, talking to parents, teachers, students, a principal, and system-level school district, state, and nonprofit leaders from across the United States. What I learned can be captured in the following statements:

- COVID-19 is impacting educators and their families both personally and professionally — and the personal and professional blend is something that they are having to make sense of daily.
- Those I spoke to do see a few silver linings amid all the challenges.
- Each of these individuals has strong feelings about reopening schools.

What I learned was invaluable and it reminded me of how critical it is to engage and listen to those who are most proximate to the work of teaching and leading in our schools and in our school systems.

But this was not the only pivot that I made because of COVID-19. The other came when I was preparing to teach this fall — for the first time — my Faith, Education, and Leadership course. This course has always been something that I felt called to do. As I have shared in other online forums, my faith has always played a pivotal role in my life. While I had been thinking about ways to elevate my faith identity in my work at Harvard, my colleague, Senior Lecturer Judith McLaughlin, was the first person to mention the idea of teaching a course about the intersection of faith and education. She and I had the fortune of sitting beside one another at the 2018 HGSE commencement. In a brief conversation during the revelry, I mentioned to her my desires to explore the role of faith and education. “You should consider teaching a course on the topic,” she said. I never forgot that conversation. Two years later, I would plan to do just that. However, I never anticipated that the world would be very different as I started planning, and there were several things on my mind.

First, I wanted the course to be one where students felt safe to explore their personal faith journeys, as well as hear and understand the journey of others. Second, I wanted students to learn about efforts that are happening already, where faith and education leaders are working together to address student and community challenges. Finally, I wanted the course to be one where students explored and designed strategies to improve outcomes for students and communities.

On March 17, that last goal changed dramatically.

On that day, the HGSE community found out that we would not be returning to campus after spring break. COVID-19 had arrested the world, and nothing — including my May term course — would get away without being impacted. But this was a good thing. What became increasingly clear by mid-April — weeks before the course — is that COVID-19 was having a devastating impact on America’s most vulnerable communities, specifically Black and Brown communities. So, the final goal of the class pivoted to one that was laser focused on seeing how faith and education organizations might work together to address the immediate needs in response to COVID-19. During the weekend class, students learned of the work being done in Boston and in Baton Rouge, as well as other communities. And, by the end of the class, students were designing other possible interventions, based on their learning in class.

In closing, COVID-19 has had a devastating impact on all parts of our lives. What I learned from these pivots are twofold. First, I was reminded of how important it is to look for opportunities to hear and understand the needs of those educators who are on the front lines in our schools and communities. The work I do as a faculty member in a higher education institution is in service of them. Second, the nimbleness of my teaching is, the better chance of not only creating powerful teaching and learning experiences, but also making contributions to practitioners and their communities.

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