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Contemporary Contexts

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News Article Analysis: The School Where the Pandemic Never Ended

Many are happy as the world is transitioning out of the pandemic. People are tired of quarantining, doing school from home, and talking with friends over Zoom, and many are excited to return to normalcy. As recently as May fifth, the World Health Organization declared that COVID-19 was no longer a public health emergency of international concern. Even at Soka, where we once all wore N-95 masks and were required to take weekly tests, covid precautions are essentially gone. Few professors and students where masks in tightly packed classrooms, and people are no longer informed if they have had close contact with covid. It sometimes feels as if covid never even happened.

However, moving on from the pandemic has not been easy for many. In a New York Times article, “The School Where the Pandemic Never Ended,” Meg Bernhard covers a Las Angeles community struggling to return to normal. In the predominantly Black and Latino elementary school of Ninety-Fifth Street Elementary School, teachers and students experienced the brunt of the pandemic. These struggles and fear of returning to the norm can be seen through the story of Lakishia Fells-Davis, an immunocompromised mother of two who works as a substitute teacher at Ninety-Fifth Street Elementary.

When her husband, Kevin, brought covid home from his job as a security guard, the whole family fell ill. With Kevin, their primary source of income during the pandemic, receiving only part of his sick pay, they experienced financial distress, unable to pay credit card bills and life insurance payments. Being immunocompromised, Lakishia had a severe fever and could not get out of bed. Her seven-year-old son, Kevin Jr., was horrified by her state and asked her if she was going to die.

Being traumatized by his experience with Covid and the pain he observed his mom go through, Kevin Jr. began to fear people who were not wearing their masks in public. He would cry and become agitated at this sight, remembering the horrific impact of this virus on his own family. The experience of the Fells-Davis family is representative of the experience of many in this community. Many lost multiple loved ones to covid, experienced financial distress, are immunocompromised, and are deeply traumatized by their pandemic experiences. Over the pandemic, the life expectancy for Latinos in California fell by six years; for Black Californians, it fell by four years. While many white people who did not feel the pandemic as aggressively are ready to move on, marginalized communities are still working through their trauma and continue to worry about catching Covid.

**Defoe**

Similar themes of socioeconomic inequality during times of pandemic can be observed in Daniel Defoes “A Journal of the Plague Year” written in 1722. This is a very historically accurate depiction of the Great London Plague of 1665, and in this paper, Defoe writes from the perspective of someone who lived in London as the plague took over this once bustling city. Towards the beginning of this paper, Defoe writes about people who escaped London out of fear of being infected by the plague. He writes, “It is true a vast many people fled, as I have observed, yet they were chiefly from the west end of the town, and from that we call the heart of the city: that is to say, among the wealthiest of the people, and such people as were unencumbered with trades and business. But of the rest, the generality stayed, and seemed to abide the worst” (Defoe, 4). Even in California, a similar phenomenon was seen as celebrities were able to hide in their Hollywood hills or escape to their farms in the middle of nowhere, while marginalized people such as people Kevin, Lakishia’s husband who continued to work as a security guard during the pandemic, eventually bring covid home.

Defoe also touches on the trauma that people experience as a result of the pandemic. He writes, “The shrieks of women and children at the windows and doors of their houses, where their dearest relations were perhaps dying, or just dead, were so frequent to be heard as we passed the streets, that it was enough to pierce the stoutest heart in the world to hear them. Tears and lamentations were seen almost in every house…” (Defoe, 4). While those who were fortunate to be able to leave London were not subjected to this kind of Trauma, those who stayed watched their loved ones die in front of them. Similarly, at Ninety-Fifth Street Elementary School teachers had to be careful as sometimes they would unintentionally bring up something that would upset a student because it reminded them of a loved one that passed away. Bernhard writes, “That same day, when Crespo [a teacher] was introducing a lesson on water and rivers to a separate class of English-language learners, a girl confided that she had lost five people to Covid.” While the experience between someone experiencing the black plague in the 1600’s and the experience of somebody experiencing Covid in 2020 may be different, for those who had no choice but to stay.

**Paine**

 In “The Rights of Man” by Thomas Paine, Paine argues that humans as a community and as a society are better able to govern themselves then a government. This can be seen in the article by the New York Times as many government entities for the United Sates, California and for this LA community have decided to put an end to pandemic protocols, deeming them no longer necessary. Bernhard writes, “Before the start of the new school year, L.A.U.S.D. rolled back most of its remaining Covid protocols, doing away with mandatory masking and testing. In an interview that aired in September, President Biden declared the pandemic “over.” At the end of February, California’s governor, Gavin Newsom, retired the state’s pandemic emergency declaration, and in May the federal government is anticipated to do the same for the country at large.”

 However, Bernhard also writes about the many people in this community who continue to wear their masks remaining Covid cautious despite the ease in restrictions. In “The Rights of Man” Paine writes, “Common interest regulates their concern, and forms their law; and the laws which common usage ordains, have a greater influence than the laws of government. In fine, society performs for itself almost everything which is ascribed to government” (Paine). Regardless of what the L.A.U.S.D., the Governor, or even the President said about the pandemic, many in this community have continued wearing their masks. When Bernhard went back to the elementary school in January of 2023, Crespo, a teacher at the school spoke about how many parents continued to fear their children getting Covid at home. Rather than telling them that covid no longer something to be concerned about, Crespo goes beyond expectations and works exceptionally hard to ensure she is creating a safe environment and that students are following protocol. While these government entities are making decisions about the end of the pandemic, they don’t understand the unique experiences of marginalized communities which may be negatively affected by this. Therefore, Crespo steps with the knowledge she has about her community and keeps her students safe knowing their families cannot afford to catch Covid.

 For many Covid is a thing of the past. However, the immense privilege behind this mindset must also be acknowledged. Many of these families at Ninety-Fifth Elementary School don’t have the privilege to be able to put away the grief of their loved ones as something in the past. Many immunocompromised individuals cannot afford to relax in their covid protocols as catching covid may lead to their death. The children who witnessed the horrors of the pandemic will have to deal with their trauma for many years to come. Defoe and Paine help us understand that these inequalities have existed far before the 2020 pandemic and that people can support their community better than government can. While it is of course okay to be excited that Covid rates are decreasing and that things feel like they are returning to normal, we must not leave behind those communities which suffered the most and continue to grapple with their feelings.

**References**

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