In March 2020, the world abruptly catapulted from fast-paced and noisy to still and quiet. As I struggled to make sense of my new environment, devoid of familiar sounds and voices, I recalled a long-forgotten memory of an evening at a friend’s house. Sitting on her back porch, I listened to the symphony of night sounds made by tree frogs, crickets, and owls. As I heard the animals and insects communicate, I realized the most prevalent sounds from my house, which is parallel to Interstate 75, were different. Later that night, I sat on my own porch and listened carefully. In the stillness between passing trucks and cars, I heard the night sounds clearly. When I shifted my focus away from the traffic and began to listen with intention, I realized that I could hear them, once again. Why? What was it about the interstate noise that captured my attention so singularly? Perhaps, it was simply louder, more insistent, more omnipresent. I wonder, now, if this analogy applies to the noise of our school lives. Although the sounds of school are many and varied, do we give more attention to the loudest, most insistent; namely standards, policies, protocols, assessments, and the myriad of other tasks on our insurmountable to-do lists? More importantly, is it possible that the less audible, less insistent sounds obscured by this noise are the stories and, within them, the needs of our children?

COVID-19 abruptly changed the way we engaged with our children. Much like the experience on my friend’s porch, we suddenly had a different perspective, one with new sounds, not dominated by the literal and figurative noise of school. For the first time, school was situated within the child’s world; we entered their space, their home, their life. This unfamiliar context left us confused and anxious about how to teach our children. As we searched for an island of certainty, we kept returning to conversation with children as a critical instructional process. Over and over teachers recounted how in this space, they were giving children more time to talk, and they were spending much more time listening. Dr. Clay (1998) suggested, “Too often school becomes a place where children write language down and teachers do the talking” (p. 28). As our teachers reflected, together, they acknowledged that too often, we talk and children listen. Even when we are side by side. But in the virtual space, authentic, multidirectional, and extended conversations with children became elevated in priority. When teachers began to listen to their children in an open, less goal-directed way, they realized how much they were learning about them, and they gained insight into their identity as people and learners. They found children who rarely talked at school suddenly eager to share their thoughts and ideas. Dr. Clay (2004) reminds us that for many children, school is a “confronting” environment from which they withdraw and “remain very quiet” (p. 8). It stands to reason that learning from the security of their homes contributed to their willingness to talk a little more, in a louder voice. Perhaps this willingness also derived from the fact that our teachers simply gave their children more opportunity to be heard. And in doing so, gave them confidence and agency to tell their stories.

Children were not the only ones who needed us during this crisis. Parents shared virtual spaces with their children; we needed to see and hear them, too. For the first time, it was the parent sitting beside their child, while we, the teachers, were the ones at a distance. Parents became our partners, giving us a rare opportunity to talk and listen to one another. Our conversations generated new insights into how we, as teachers, inadvertently neglect parents as essential members of our team. Far too often, we allow the pace and noise of school life to limit our contact with parents.
our contact with parents. Moreover, when we do contact them, we dictate the terms and boundaries of the communication, sometimes resulting in exchanges that are unidirectional. In essence, we talk, and parents listen. Is it possible that school can become a “confronting” environment, for parents as well, rendering them silent, mirroring the experience of their children (Clay, 1998)? But, just as they had with children, teachers began to communicate with parents in more informal, prolonged, and authentic ways. As we engaged in genuine conversation with children and parents, they began to share their stories with us. And us with them. We began to listen to each other. And our collective stories fostered multidirectional, reciprocal, and mutual understanding. It is sobering to realize that those stories were always there, but maybe, like the night sounds, we weren’t listening intently for them. Perhaps they had been drowned out by the noise and pace of school. The stillness and quiet enabled us to hear them, maybe for the first time. Listening to one another helped us to see, hear, and understand each other as people first, and as students, parents and teachers second.

In a broader sense, the pace and noise of life can distract us from listening for the stories of the people beyond our classrooms. As a nation and a world, the stillness gave us an unprecedented opportunity to really see and hear one another. Newscasts and social media posts elevated stories about access and equity in healthcare, technology, transportation, job opportunities, housing, voting rights, and personal safety. It’s not as though we were unaware that these stories existed, but the noise of our day-to-day lives silenced them. But, once our world became quiet and still, we began to listen to these stories of struggle, disenfranchisement, and injustice with greater focus and intention. And, we realized, these stories are those of our children, parents, and communities. Charlotte Huck (1999) reminds us, “Every person’s life is a story” (p. 113). And many are less audible, even silenced by the noise, so we must listen intently in order to hear them. These stories are neither distant nor separate from our work, even if they differ from, or conflict with, our own world views. If we ignore them, or worse, allow them to be muted, we are limiting what is possible for the children and families we serve.

We have learned a great deal about our children, our work, our communities, and ourselves from this experience. What matters, now, is what we do with that learning. As we move back into the noise, do we carry what we’ve learned forward, or do we leave it all behind? Had I simply listened to the night sounds from my friend’s porch and left them there, I would have robbed myself of the opportunity to hear them from my house. Instead, when I returned to my own space with a new perspective, I was able to tune out the more insistent noises and, once again, hear the sounds that were the soundtrack of my childhood in Eastern Kentucky. Those sounds were always there, in my backyard, but I had stopped listening for them. As an education community, we cannot stop listening. We must be vigilant, listening carefully for the softer voices, those that are muted by the cacophony of school noise. Because ultimately, those voices tell the stories of our collective humanity.

References