



# Editorial

## Rising Tides

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Context is everything. And in this case, the articles in this issue of *OS/OS* have taken on additional significance and resonance because of the overlapping and unprecedented contexts in which we are currently existing.

The COVID-19 shutdown of the economy has forced a rethink of the institutions, jobs and decision-making mechanisms that are pivotal to keeping people safe and provided for.

The brutal murder of George Floyd by police in Minneapolis on May 25 sparked a massive civil uprising across the continent, condemning state violence and systemic anti-Black racism.

While inequality and racism have long infected our public and democratic institutions, economy and society, these two events made longstanding injustice and inequity impossible to ignore. Even for those well-insulated from the effects of injustice in “normal” times.

At its best, and when it is properly resourced, public education can provide a basis from which we can all, collectively, address and overcome the inequity and injustice woven throughout our society. But at its worst, public education can reflect, reinforce and normalize those oppressions — reinforcing the inadequate status quo that brutalizes far too many.

I edited this issue of *Our Schools/Our Selves* while working at home, alongside my kids who are learning remotely. The articles herein were provided by contributors who themselves are navigating this remarkable situation as researchers, educators, parents and students. I

want to thank them for being so generous with their time and knowledge.

The subjects they write about, while magnified by COVID-19 and the anti-Black-racism uprisings taking place across the continent, have long been areas of concern in classrooms and communities. Recent events and renewed awareness, however, provide for the possibility of a radical rethink of how our schools are equipped and supported to meet society’s needs much more justly, equitably and compassionately than they have been.

Standardized testing can undermine a love of learning and curiosity among kids who do not do well on this type of assessment, or reinforce class- and race-based assumptions about schools (and the neighbourhoods where they’re located) that “score poorly.” The postponement of these tests due to provincewide job action, and their eventual cancellation as a result of the shutdown, provides an opportunity to examine how better to assess whether kids’ needs are being met, and where we can do better. Much better.

Online learning has been a topic of heated debate across the country, due in no small part to the surge in edutech companies keen to capitalize on this profitable learning frontier. The shutdown of schools due to COVID-19 heightened the discussion, as it soon became evident that online learning — or, rather, crisis learning — was not the panacea that had been promised.

Shuttering the physical school buildings revealed even more starkly the inequities

between students and communities that a “regular” school day partially camouflaged. Schools and boards scrambled to provide families with access to devices and Wi-Fi, and parents quickly learned that supporting their kids’ learning from home was perhaps more challenging than anyone had anticipated. For others, it exposed the emotional toll school had taken on their children, whose educational and emotional needs were not being met, sometimes with devastating consequences.

Concerns were also raised about online privacy and surveillance, not to mention increased screen time given reduced opportunities for kids to find alternative or outdoor activities. Many parents themselves had to work and couldn’t supervise 24/7, or were simply exhausted by daily arguments about doing schoolwork.

A return to “schooling as usual” is simply not an option if we are to honour the promise of public education for the students and communities it serves and the knowledge and experience of the professionals who work in those schools and classrooms.

The shutdown has revealed the degree to which we are connected by services and institutions, and dependent on the labour of those whose work is often disrespected or even treated as invisible. Even if their own workplaces are safe and they can get there without risking exposure, parents cannot return to work if their children have no schools or daycares to go to.

And those facilities cannot open if workers and children are not able to be safe, particularly because of the high level of proximity and contact that is a necessary part of engaged learning and care. But what do we mean by “safe”? What do we mean by “schooling as usual”?

“Safe” schools are in good repair and sufficiently staffed so that they can be cleaned and sanitized to reduce the risk of being exposed to COVID-19. Their educators and education workers are properly supported and resourced so they can practice physical distancing, take the time to meet students’ individual needs and to work with their families. They confront injustice and oppression, listening to students,

families and educators across the entire school community to keep kids safe, respected and nurtured. They recognize that the school’s responsibility is not to teach kids to adapt to the insufficient status quo, but to identify its failings and to be supported in changing it for the better.

Because of course, merely reopening schools will not “fix” social injustice. Racism, homophobia, misogyny, ableism, inequity, settler-colonialism.... All are pervasive in this society, and schools are not immune. But to address them requires broad community engagement and a commitment to listen to those most affected. It requires trust and accountability, and the ability to listen to and respond to criticism — and for all of us but especially those in positions of authority to recognize the role they have played in maintaining an unjust and oppressive status quo, and to commit to doing better. It’s hard work, much harder than a well-worded statement of support, which can far too often lead to sweeping the issue under the rug as a “difficult” or “painful” subject, or even rebranded as a feel-good exercise.

After several months of the shutdown, and with provinces exploring what reopening means and for what sectors, it’s clear that the conflict between those calling for a return to austerity and “system efficiencies,” and those advocating for a just, sustainable and healthy emergence, will continue.

But the veil that the elites have counted on for too long has been lifted. Inadequate funding formulas coupled with standardized assessments are a one-two neoliberal punch. They fuel good school/bad school narratives, and the demands for boutique programs and specialized schools that are the hallmark of a two-tier public system. They deny to marginalized communities the promise of what education and learning has to offer, while hiding behind edu-speak, racist assumptions and meritocratic gaslighting.

The tide is rising. We can rise with it, working for new and equitable standards of social progress and justice. Or we can cling to a failed status quo that will ultimately sink under its own gilded weight, dragging us and future generations down with it. ●