Our Schools/Our Selves

The Voice Of Progressive Education In Canada

Canadian Centre For Policy Alternatives

Winter/Spring 2022

THE CRISIS CONTINUUM AND THE ROLE OF PUBLIC EDUCATION IN A JUST RECOVERY

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Navigating the crisis continuum in public education

Erika Shaker

We're rushing towards the end of the year as I write this. And amidst the last minute phone calls, and final reports getting out the door, I'm struck by the pervasive feeling of déjà vu.

No doubt this has a lot to do with the pandemic—the feeling of sameness, in spite of evidence of what's actually changing. There is a sense of monotony, and as winter arrives that feeling becomes more acute. Here we are, again. Almost two years, and several waves of the pandemic later. We know more. We're double vaxxed (some triple vaxxed), and younger kids are receiving their doses.

And yet...so much feels the same as it did at this point in 2020.

I don't mean to suggest that there's been no progress. This fall I hugged my parents for the first time in almost two years, and we'll be seeing them over the holidays (though we're staying in a hotel, and will have to eat dinner in shifts). I cannot begin to express what this means to me.

My kids have spent an entire three months in school.

I had dinner with friends in an actual restaurant.

Oh, and we got a dog.

But with Omicron on the march, this sense of déjà vu lingers. And it goes beyond the personal, beyond the Google chats and Zoom calls.

It goes back to my work in education over the past two decades (more, if I'm being honest). And the cold realization that, through the years, advocates were warning about the encroachment of EdTech, the rise of privatization, and the impact of consecutive waves of cuts (or funding not keeping pace with growth or with inflation).

Time and time again we raised the alarm about the over-reliance on standardized assessments, and how it was being weaponized by reformers to prove that education was *still* in crisis; that Johnny *still* couldn't read, that educators were *still* not doing enough and that, as a result, we were *still* losing out to [insert country name here].

And the solutions (again) were...depressingly familiar. More testing. More standardization. More EdTech. More calls that schools must do "more with less." Oh, and more resilience from students, parents, teachers and education workers. But it's not lost on me that over those same decades I've heard very few calls from elected officials for more funding to meet kids where they're at. Or for community outreach. Or

for smaller classes and more opportunities for personalized learning and authentic assessment that recognizes kids are not standardized. And while acknowledgement of our settler colonial history and the legacy of white supremacy has (barely) begun, it still meets resistance from those who are quite comfortable with the way things are, thank you very much. Back to the basics, less of that "extra."

As one of our guest editors pointed out, COVID-19 is unprecedented...but as a crisis that has upended the system it is not alone. It is the latest in a long series of "crises" in education; a disruptor in its own right, but also a magnifier of the existing crises and, eventually, something that is mobilized as an excuse to implement more of the same tactics that made our schools less responsive to all the students in their care in the first place.

The cuts that resulted in heavy reliance on private fundraising campaigns. The standardized tests that were used as a proxy to determine whether kids were engaged with their learning, while punishing the schools and communities that served the most vulnerable populations and the students with the greatest needs. The crowded classrooms and under-resourced educators that, rather than being a problem, were—somehow—supposed to prepare kids for the rigours of university lecture halls and the job market. The suggestion that public money should go towards "helping" parents find private solutions for their kids. The mandatory online learning that parents, students and educators pushed back against, citing concerns with inequitable access to technology, implications for quality, and reliance on a learning model that didn't work for so many kids.

In spite of these being referred to as "innovative," they're not. They weren't innovative pre-pandemic, and they're certainly not innovative now. Neither are they "solutions." They're symptoms of the true crisis in education — the lack of sufficient support and prioritization education requires and that kids and families deserve, particularly when the world goes pear-shaped.

Austerity got us here, and calls for more of the same will not cure what ails us.

COVID-19 has been a devastating disruptor. It has laid bare the cumulative impact of subsequent waves of austerity — the true crisis of neglect that undermines our education system and that marks our society even as we happily share those "Meanwhile in Canada" videos. Neglect of the need to meet students where they're at in order for them to thrive. Neglect of the funding and resources needed so that educators can support kids and communities in schools which are both places of work and places of learning. Neglect of students with exceptionalities and special needs and the resources required to ensure they too can thrive. Neglect of the socioeconomic inequity both magnified and compounded by COVID-19. Neglect of the shameful legacy of colonialism and racism that is by no means confined to classrooms.

This collection of articles addresses those pre-existing crises, and how COVID-19 illuminated them, underscored them...and has provided us with an opportunity to have an honest conversation about the chasm between the schools we're told we can afford and the ones we know our kids — all our kids — deserve.

My profound thanks to Beyhan Farhadi and Sue Winton for their dedication, thoughtfulness, energy and care in putting this collection together, and for their own work in advocating for the very best in public education and public schools, and the people who give so much of themselves in making that very best a reality.

Education in crisis

COVID-19 edition

Beyhan Farhadi and Sue Winton

How has the COVID-19 crisis affected teachers, families, and ongoing threats to public education? This special issue of *Our Schools/Our Selves* emerged from our research with secondary teachers in Ontario and Alberta who expressed frustration with education policies that failed to meet the needs of students in their care during the pandemic. They described[1] challenges of interpreting and translating contradictory policy directives; impacts on students and educational equity; and the wearing effects on their mental health and well-being, which were consistent with findings reported from the Canadian Teachers' Federation.[2]

Rather than taking a binary approach to enacting policy directives — by implementing them uncritically or by simply ignoring them — teachers consider a multitude of variables as they decide[3] how policies will be enacted in their classrooms. Educators' choices are shaped by their local context, which include professional culture, values and attitudes, physical and digital infrastructure, staffing and budget, as well as the broader social, economic, and political context within which schools are situated.

Disruption to education during the COVID-19 pandemic was certainly not limited to secondary teachers nor to just two provinces. It was a global experience that differentially impacted students[4] and posed acute challenges to teachers, early childhood educators, occasional teachers, educational support and professional support personnel — all of whom are an integral part of maintaining continuity and connection in schools.

Frontline workers, including teachers, are leaders in this pandemic. They are compelled to exercise agency and creativity when confronted by gaps in policy even as it impacts their workload and mental health. Our study's findings show that teachers in adult education, education in congregate settings (e.g., in group homes), rural, remote, and northern communities, and Intensive Support Programs serving students with autism, and students with physical, developmental, and learning disabilities, struggled to interpret and enact government policies that did not take their students' needs or learning environments into account.

While frontline leadership during a crisis in the absence of support may be necessary, it is also, ultimately, unsustainable and not a solution to broader struggles for investment in social support for those vulnerable to systemic inequity.

From Saskatchewan, Ontario, and Nova Scotia, to New Brunswick, Manitoba, and

Alberta, commentaries and articles in this issue centre the voices of education workers and their experiences during this pandemic. They also communicate research that highlights the impact of the pandemic on students and families, as well as parallel social crises: the underfunding of social services, divestment from public education, systemic oppression and anti-Black racism.

These insights do not call for a return to normal but instead offer a chorus of authors demanding transformation in schooling, one that centres justice for students vulnerable to harm in the education system. Public education is aspirational and, as many articles in this special issue show, reflects and often reproduces societal inequities; however, it is also a system among many public services worthy of defense.

A looming alternative is a market-based model of schooling, a foothold for which has been strengthened through EdTech opportunism and the expansion of surveillance technologies during the COVID-19 pandemic. For the first time in history, mass numbers of students were forced to learn online and, in certain jurisdictions, some continue to do so under a crisis model of online education that deprofessionalizes education workers, monetizes public education, and leaves students behind.

Market-based models of schooling also include legislation poised to expand charter schools[5] in Alberta and direct household cash transfers in Ontario,[6] both of which divest funding from public education. There is resistance to these efforts, and success such as the case of Manitoba where attempts to centralize and remove representation from decision making were defeated.[7] As reforms continue to chip away at our public education system during and beyond this crisis, we must remain skeptical of language that centres "choice," "efficiency," and "modernization."

A vision for public education has to be more ambitious than just reform inside the school. It requires a transformation of conditions under which many children grow up and must centre frontline voices in education, including education workers, students, and the families they serve. Once we recognize the interdependence of schools within communities, and between communities, we are called to resist efforts to dismantle education as a public good; to reclaim a vision for education grounded in participatory democracy, equality, and justice; and to revolutionize how education leadership is conceptualized, practiced, and sustained.

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Leaving harmful

Why we can't go back to normal

Shannon Salisbury

It's autumn 2021 as I write this, and we're almost two years into living under the restrictions of COVID-19. Over 1.6 million people have contracted the virus and almost 28,000 people have died in Canada since the start of the pandemic; in response, the vast majority of us have had to deal with changes in our work, leisure, and schooling in the hope of curbing transmission, particularly while waiting for vaccines.

A lot of the process of shutting down and opening up again has been messy and counter-intuitive. In particular, the position of schools in our communities has been…contentious. Public schools play a foundational role in keeping the economy open, as they provide free child supervision (among other things) so that adult family members can engage in paid work. While the capitalism argument has been part of the larger conversation surrounding schools it was flattened very early on in the pandemic by claims that school closures were catastrophic for children's mental health.

Let's be clear about something right from the beginning: mental health and wellness can be negatively influenced by any significant change in routine, predictability, and stability. It stands to reason, then, that mental health overall would suffer under a global pandemic during which our access to what we consider "normal" is impeded, our family members are getting sick and even dying, our finances (and therefore housing and food security) may be at risk, and we're isolated from any family and friends who don't live with us.

It also makes sense that changes to school access, a stable constant for many, would have an impact on the mental wellness of not only children and youth who attend, but also their adult family members who rely on this support. But is school a universal good for all students' wellness? Is "getting back to normal" really the best answer for everyone? Is returning to that "normal" the best we can hope for?

While so much of the conversation about schooling in a pandemic has been focused on this desperate need to be in the school buildings, it's important that we're clear about where the loudest voices in these pleas are coming from: the families who have chosen in-school learning and who have been the loudest critics of virtual learning are disproportionately white and affluent (Crawley, 2020). This is critical information, as white children from affluent families are generally the students for whom school works most effectively. This focus on bricks-and-mortar learning environments as universally essential to child and youth mental health ignores the reality that pre-COVID schooling regularly pushed children and youth out.

What does the "normal" we're being pushed back into look like, anyway? It looks like 2SLGBTQ+ students feeling unsafe in washrooms, hallways, and gym classes (Peter et al., 2021, 73), and being twice as likely to skip school as

their cisgender/heterosexual peers (85). Twice as many transgender students as cisgender students (74% vs 37%) agree with the statement "it is hard for me to feel accepted at my school" (86). Does that sound like school is an affirming place that is essential to youth mental health?

Schools are also spaces in which Black students make up almost half of the expulsions in the largest school board in the country, compared to only 10% who are white (Naccarato, 2017). They're also twice as likely as white students to drop out of school before graduating, in spite of only making up 11% of the board's total population (Appa & Kurek, 2019). Little wonder that some Black students have been thriving in their virtual school classes (Miller, 2021): academic success is much more achievable when children are not also dealing with systemic and interpersonal racist expectations on their behaviour and intellectual capacity.

There's another piece to this: when we talk about inhibited access to schooling, are we talking only about student mental health and wellbeing? Are the families fighting for schools to stay open at all costs doing so because of their children's distress, or their own? Could it be that children and youth who have experienced a crisis as a result of COVID-19 school closures are reflecting the stress of their caregivers? Children of anxious caregivers have been far less likely to go to parks and engage in outdoor play, and far more likely to engage in extended periods of computer use (McCormack et al., 2020). Additionally, families in which there are children under 18 have experienced significantly more mental health deterioration than those families not parenting children under 18 (Gadermann et al., 2021).

Parenting in typical times can feel impossibly challenging, and we have not been in typical times for almost two years. Of course feelings of anxiety and stress are going to increase when one of the biggest parent supports becomes completely inaccessible to them. Whether we want to admit it or not, in-person schooling does provide respite and child care. This role allows parents and caregivers to engage in paid and unpaid labour, and to have a break from 24/7 caregiving. When schools were closed, overall family stress increased, in no small part because of this loss of support.

The pandemic has made it clear that there is an ongoing and significant gap in support available to families. If school is the only respite a caregiver has from parenting, when that service becomes unavailable, that caregiver becomes isolated in their parenting. If school is the only form of child care a parent has, the loss of this service increases that family's financial precarity. For some, however, being "forced" to stay at home with their children actually alleviated some caregiver stress, particularly those who qualified for emergency financial benefits in order to do so (Tombeau Cost et al., 2021). Once again, the mental health experiences of both parents/caregivers and youth are not universal, and we need to go deeper when engaging in these discussions.

The push for schools to be safer is essential, but it's no more critical today, almost two years into a global pandemic, than it has been for all the decades Black, Indigenous, other students of colour, disabled students, 2SLGBTQ+ students, and others who have needed it.

We also need to ensure that families of school-aged children have the support they need to reduce isolation and caregiver burnout. We need to understand, when parents demand support for their children's wellbeing, that they're also saying their own wellbeing is threatened. When we hear family members express concerns about child and youth mental health, we need to consider both who is included in these concerns and those who have been expressing concerns for decades — before COVID-19 was an issue.

Before becoming a secondary teacher, **Shannon Salisbury** (she/them) worked in public education, community development, and social work. Her teaching practice is deeply informed by her experience of being a parent. They can be found on Twitter at @just_shannon_s.

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“I feel like there should have been an opportunity for consultation”

Navigating pandemic education reforms with New Brunswick teachers

Matt Rogers and Casey Burkholder

On April 2nd, 2020, the New Brunswick Department of Education and Early Childhood Development (EECD) presented a Continuity of Learning Plan in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. George Daley, Deputy Minister of Education, stated: “I know we’re in a difficult situation here, but I think coming out the other side, we’ve got a chance to reform education in a way that we’ve never had before” (NB EECD, 2020).

Recognizing the gaps between policy and on-the-ground realities, our action-oriented study investigates how crisis-influenced changes are affecting school cultures in the context of New Brunswick. Through a series of qualitative interviews with 19 in-service teachers between summer 2020 and spring 2021, we sought to understand teachers’ experiences navigating evolving reforms.

While building knowledge about educators’ experiences navigating the pandemic is important, we also hoped our work could be useful and productive while decisions about educational reform were being made. This action-oriented dimension of the study involved distributing quarterly reports and short videos about the research via social media. Our intention was to influence public discourse and policy discussions by offering direct and responsive information while policymakers were making key decisions about reform.

This dimension of our project echoes sentiments recently expressed by the Human Sciences Research Council of South Africa (Sobane, Gastrow, & Oosthuizen, 2021). In advocating for open access publication of policy briefs where “dense research reports are repackaged in an easily accessible language and style to highlight key research activities, findings and recommendations” (p. 3), Sobane

et al. highlight the significance of having contextual-specific, rapid, responsive, and reliable information available in order for policymakers and the public to make sound decisions about policy and practice. As they suggest:

> During the COVID-19 pandemic, policymakers have had to contend with pandemic related time constraints and large volumes of research from various sources, some of which did not apply to all country settings. [Policy briefs that are]… widely disseminated to policymakers and the broader public, [provide] an important pathway to achieving greater research impact. (Sobane et al., 2021, para. 3)

Although our reports are not full policy-briefs (i.e., they do not provide concrete suggestions for policy), they provided rich, rapid, and responsive information that was made publicly available in a timely fashion during the 2020/2021 school year.

In this article, we reflect on our project through the following questions: 1) How were crisis-fueled reforms experienced and understood by teachers during the first three waves of the COVID-19 pandemic in New Brunswick?; and, 2) How might releasing rapid research reports foster more responsive approaches to reform, policy discussion, and school practice?

Figure 1: still image from our findings video on communication, summer 2020

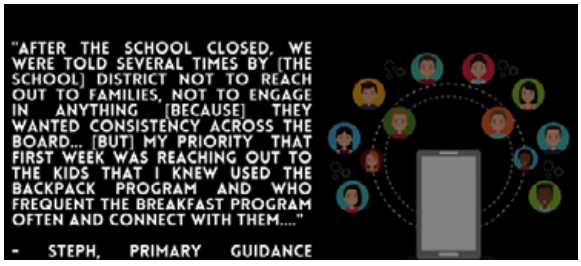

Figure 2: sharing our findings on social media

Context for the study

In spring 2020, we began recruiting New Brunswick teachers for an interview-based study on their experiences of teaching during the pandemic. We spoke with 19 teachers who described how their work shifted during this time, their transition back to classroom teaching, their reactions to changing public health restrictions, and the pandemic's impact on teachers' work and home lives. After each set of interviews (summer 2020; fall 2020; winter 2021, summer, 2021), we transcribed the data, coded the interviews for themes, and then put together short reports and short videos (see Figure 1) that highlighted the findings.

We shared these findings on YouTube and Twitter (see Figure 2), through traditional media (e.g. radio interviews with CBC) and through public presentations to professional organizations. In what follows, we highlight our main findings from the study, including our experiences with releasing our findings in a responsive and public-facing way.

Findings: shifting policies, equity issues and need for mental health supports

Through our interviews, we gained a better understanding of how teachers and students responded to school closures and the transition to online and distance education models between March and June 2020. Additionally, we discovered how teachers adapted to changing work environments during the 2020/2021 school year. Teachers, students, and school cultures were impacted by a number of issues, including: 1) frustration with shifting policies and a lack of communication; 2) exhaustion from working conditions and dissatisfaction with mental health supports for students and teachers; and 3) concern about equity issues compounded by blended and at-home learning.

Throughout the majority of the 2020/2021 school year, the New Brunswick EECD followed a consistent public health policy that dictated when schools would transition to online learning in response to rising COVID-19 case numbers in communities. The province used color-coded phases to signal public health regulations. The Red Phase indicated a near-complete closure (e.g. non-essential businesses were closed, and restaurants were restricted to take-out or delivery). The Orange Phase relaxed some restrictions, allowing businesses to admit patrons indoors if social distancing and masking

remained in effect. The Yellow Phase meant fewer public limitations, and Green signified no restrictions.

Until the winter of 2021, when a community entered the Red Phase, public health restrictions stated that schools must transition to online-only instruction. However, when confirmed COVID-19 infections began to rise in one health zone, and a call was made to transition the community to Red, the EECD abruptly altered its school policy so that in-person learning would be maintained even in the redesignated Red Phase. In our interviews after this policy change occurred, we learned that teachers were incredibly frustrated by abruptly shifting policies and a lack of communication. As Mel, a middle school teacher, remarked:

> My reaction to the last-minute change in government policy initially was of great surprise... given the fact that the government had changed the position and the fact that schools were going to be open in Red—it made me realize that there were discussions publicly quite wide within education, or at least in certain stratospheres within education but that we, classroom teachers or teachers in schools, were not previewed to the details of those [discussions]... I feel like there should have been an opportunity for consultation.

Throughout the year, we heard similar sentiments from other educators.

While some teachers interpreted this lack of consultation as an attack on their professional identity, others described how insufficient communication and stressful working conditions exacerbated their exhaustion and mental strain. As Beth, an elementary school teacher, pointed out, educators were subject to stressors at school and home:

> ...a few teachers were home with three or four children by themselves, young children... because daycares were not open or anything like that, so there were issues there too and issues of, you know, spouses having lost their jobs and financial stressors on families.

Similarly, Marjorie, a high school teacher, suggested that stress had consequences not only for teachers, but also for students:

> These past few months I'm seeing more and more of the anxiousness and the [accumulation] of stress come out. The kids are exhausted, they are tired. I've seen kids have panic attacks more this year. Our guidance office has just been a revolving door. There are not enough counselors for all the kids who need support and I see the same thing with colleagues. We are stressed, we are disheartened. The move to Red was hard on us, on all of us, and I know that I am not speaking for just myself on this one.

Many of these conversations extended into an expressed dissatisfaction with mental health supports for students and teachers alike.

Through our conversations it became clear that existing equity issues (income inequality, lack of resources in the home) were exacerbated by the pandemic. Carly, a high school teacher, noted that:

> A lot of these parents, and these students, depend on the schools not just as centres of learning, but as a centre for the delivery of social programs and access to social programs and assistance. When you took that out of the equation, it became extremely difficult to support these families in that way. They had been accustomed to being supported, and that's something that we need to look at going forward.

Denise, a policymaker, argued that some educational policies that sought to address inequalities (e.g. providing laptop access to all secondary students) did not address all inequalities:

> So, the main goals are: go and get everybody a laptop. Well, let's think about this then: ok, so now everybody has a laptop, what does that guarantee you? Does that guarantee everybody's going to be signing on? Does that guarantee everybody's engaged now? Does that guarantee that every single educator is going to be using these platforms, software learning? It doesn't. So, the equity piece goes way beyond providing a service or a piece of equipment.

Reflection on teachers' experiences during the 2020/2021 school year provided a variety of lessons about navigating education during a time of crisis-fueled reform (see also Sobane et al., 2021). But the strategies and methods we used to release this information offers another dimension for contemplation. We shared the experiences of educators in our reports and social media posts to bring attention to the voices of teachers navigating the pandemic. And as part of our broader study, we released thematically-organized data in short videos on social media and quarterly research reports.

Some of our intentions were affirmed. Our posts and reports were shared on social media (Facebook and Twitter). The reports were distributed widely by educators, parents with school-aged children, and local education

administrators and policymakers. Our success in mobilizing the research on social media highlights how the public, and educators specifically, saw value in having this information widely available.

Another indicator of the value of the research was its impact on mobilization: new educators volunteered to participate in interviews following each publication of social media posts. Participants often expressed how they felt the work was worthwhile and could have implications for policy, discourse, and change going forward.

Apart from recruitment, our rapid-release social media strategy piqued the interest of provincial media. Following the November 2020 release of our first report, we were contacted by New Brunswick CBC Radio for a series of interviews about the research and our data. This coverage led to further recruitment of new teacher participants.

However, the CBC interviews had an additional implication in terms of policy impact. After our initial interview in November 2020, we were contacted by the New Brunswick Teachers' Association who invited us to share our findings with a small executive group in December 2020. After that meeting, we were invited to present again to the broader union membership in February 2021. The president of the union expressed that while the information in our reports reflected a lot of the comments he was hearing from union members over the year, it was useful to have the information concisely documented and organized in preparation for policy discussions with the EECD.

The February, 2021 newsletter from the NBTA, described our research as having:

> affirmed the stories we have heard of your heartbreak and heroism on the front lines. We will continue to follow their research and keep collecting your stories from the front lines as we work hard to amplify your professional voice at the provincial level.

This encapsulates the ability of action-oriented rapid information release methodologies to mobilize the voices of educators, frontline workers, and stakeholders for policy discussion purposes.

Concluding thoughts

Teachers' frustrations with shifting policies, a lack of consultation and communication, exhaustion from working conditions, and dissatisfaction with mental health supports demonstrate how divisive and troublesome widespread crisis-driven reform can be. Additionally, their concern for equity demonstrates the importance of considering nuanced and complex issues when developing reform policies.

As our project draws to a close, and while COVID-19 endures, we are reflecting on our observations about the impact of our action-oriented approach. There remain a number of unanswered questions regarding the limitations, benefits, and complexities of rapid-release methods. We wonder: what could we have done differently to ensure that the data reached policymakers and influenced policy discussions? Are there equity concerns or power dynamics we have overlooked in our attempt to publish data rapidly? How might we better anticipate and reflexively navigate these equity issues in our data collection and dissemination in future projects? Who benefits from this approach and who might be harmed by it? How might rapid-release curatorial coding processes reinforce already dominant discourses circulating in schools while further marginalizing perspectives and voices that have been historically disenfranchised?

We will keep these questions at the fore as we continue to explore the experiences of New Brunswick teachers, within and beyond the COVID-19 pandemic.

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Inclusion interrupted?

The impact of COVID restrictions on inclusion and belonging in classroom communities

Gemma Porter

It's all about relationships

My colleagues and I sometimes like to poke fun at the cliched message new and veteran teachers alike hear time and time again: "it's all about relationships." Eye roll inducing though it may be, any educator invested in student growth knows how true this is. Teaching in the middle, as middle years teachers like to sometimes call it, is where I came to understand the honest, genuine, rewarding weight of a relational approach to teaching. Thrust into the world of navigating the throes that accompany adolescence — questions of identity, friendships, and the tricky landscape of becoming more than "just" friends for the first time — teaching in the middle requires a compassion for the whirlwind that is early adolescence.

A sense of belonging is crucial to cultivating and sustaining positive, inclusive learning experiences for all students. Many educators in the K-12 public education system are all too aware of the extent to which such factors of community and belonging are accentuated when thinking about our increasingly diverse student populations.

As a teacher working with grade 10 through 12 students at a large high school during the 2020–2021 school year, I found myself struggling to create and sustain a welcoming, safe, and supportive learning environment.

In recent years, framing and defining inclusive education has taken on a more universal approach to focus on conditions and practices that address the needs of diverse learners. Provincial jurisdictions across the country have moved towards models of inclusion that define inclusive learning environments as those that service *all* students,[1] as opposed to earlier policies more narrowly focused on addressing the needs of students with physical or cognitive exceptionalities.

While notions of inclusive policies and practices are neither novel nor new, the shifts prompted by the outbreak and persistence of the COVID-19 pandemic caused, and continue to pose, serious impediments to the ability of teachers and schools to sustain the meaningful connections essential to inclusive education.

Provincial jurisdictions across Canada were faced with a myriad of challenges to the

continued delivery of education to students throughout the 2020–2021 academic year. In Saskatchewan, following the direction of Chief Medical Health Officer Dr. Saqib Shahab, K-12 public schools were able to continue in-person learning for students throughout the academic year.

This is not to say the province and its students did not experience periodic interruptions to that delivery. During a school year already fraught with serious systemic changes to the public schooling experience including mandatory masking, social distancing, a new quad system of course delivery[2] and suspension of extra-curricular activities, by mid November many Saskatchewan students attending schools with populations of at least 600 were learning from home every second day.[3] In this "hybrid" model of delivery, students attended school virtually one day and then in person the next. Depending on the class and teacher, student learning during their at home days could have been either synchronous, asynchronous, or a mixture of both.

"This really sucks"

The few minutes that students can grab in the transition from one class to the next in a high school are some of the best snapshots into students' day to day lives and feelings that I get. While those few minutes between classes in past years were characterized by the hustle and bustle of 30ish students pouring into the room, in the 2020–2021 year of hybrid delivery, these moments became the site of conversations that inform some of my most reflective moments of my teaching career.

Heading into school for her only in person class of the day I would often have these wonderfully brief but incredibly insightful conversations with a grade 12 student. Let's call her Amanda. Amanda, like many other students, came to school every second day alone, sat in a classroom structured by health and safety protocols and procedures, and left. Most often alone and disconnected from her peers who attended school in person on the days she was at home, one day in our musings about COVID life, Amanda came to the crass but apt conclusion: "This really sucks."

While Amanda navigated the challenges of a schooling experience that largely neglected the important role of socialization with resilience, there were many students who did not. Over the course of the academic year, a growing number of students made the decision to completely opt-out of in person learning in favour of completing online or mail-in, prepackaged courses through our alternate education centre.

In addition to these exchanges with students, time and again over the course of the school year my conversations with colleagues often centred on the disconnect and disengagement we were witnessing in our classrooms. Void of opportunities to collaborate with colleagues in the interest of maintaining limited contact points within the school, stealing a conversation while passing a colleague in the hallway became a frequent go to for me. I used these brief moments of collegial conversation to garner some sense of the climate and culture outside of the isolating four walls of my classroom down at the end of the hall.

“Do your kids talk?”
Breezing past a dynamic and invested chemistry teacher whose classroom sits across and down the hall a few doors from mine, I asked casually, “Hey, how’s things?” What followed was an exchange that characterizes many conversations with colleagues from various disciplines over the course of the academic year. The gist of this teacher’s response: uneventful really and it’s kind of weird — the kids, they just don’t really talk anymore — do your kids talk?

Put so succinctly, it brought to bear the eerie quiet that many of us were finding in our classrooms — something our principal even noted in one of our virtual staff meetings. Our once vibrant classrooms filled with the welcome clamour of discussion and collaboration, were more silent than ever. We have to keep trying, our principal encouraged us — now more than ever our kids need to feel connected, like they belong here.

The struggle to maintain high quality supports for a wide variety of diverse learners while being mindful of personal health and wellbeing amidst an unpredictable global health crisis proved a momentous challenge. Inclusive models of teaching and learning require a collaborative team effort. Prior to COVID-19, students with modifications and adaptations to the learning program in the form of additional one-on-one supports from our educational support teachers and educational assistants were able to access these services within a daily, fluid, and collaborative structure.

While students continued to access student support services throughout the pandemic, functioning within the hybrid model of learning meant that students were no longer able to access services daily — a point that became increasingly problematic when on weeks where students attended school on a Thursday and were not back in person until Monday. Even when they were at school in person, those supports hinged on the context of that particular day and week. Limits on numbers of students in a small room and the availability of overworked education support teachers trying to navigate the shifting context of school supports during a health crisis meant that students were sometimes unable to access student services.

The interruption of daily supports also presented some unique challenges to students who regularly visited our counselling services prior to COVID-19. One of my most memorable students from the course of my 10 plus years of teaching quickly comes to mind when I think about how hard 2020–2021 was for all students, but especially so for students struggling to navigate the increasing precariousness of their school life and their mental wellness.

“It’s just been really hard”
The bell to signal the start of class sounded and my grade 12 students were still trickling through the door and into their seats. A few students were missing from the L-Z cohort for the day and, as I normally do, I asked the students in class what the hold-up was. Big, super long, super hard calculus exam. This triggered my Spidey senses with respect to one student. A perfectionist at heart, never satisfied with anything less than a 90% on any assessment, facing bouts of anxiety, I knew this was going

to be a tough afternoon. I was able to stop this student before she entered class. Clearly in need of some time to decompress after a long exam, in between tears and expressions of absolute exhaustion, came the simple comment that bears so much weight for so many over the course of the last two years: "It's just been really hard."

What this student professed over the next 15 minutes or so of conversation was that the supports and the regular contact that she so needed to support her learning had been interrupted. Hybrid learning meant that she felt isolated and without the supports she craved every second day. A student who truly thrived under the tutelage of caring teachers supported by regular counseling sessions throughout the week, was frequently left feeling disconnected, overwhelmed, and disappointed.

Increasing disruptions and interruptions with the delivery of support services significantly impacted the extent to which our students with physical and cognitive exceptionalities were integrated into the classroom. With health and safety protocols sitting at the fore of school-based and classroom-based decision making, COVID-19 ushered in a return to what can best be described as a together but separate approach.

"What's with that desk back there?"

The beginning of the 2020–2021 school year began much the same as any other year: setting up our classroom spaces. And just like any other year, my friend and I set up our classroom spaces together. Together, we are mindful of the physical environment and how these spaces reflect a whole cast of hidden assumptions about the kinds of activities that will take place here and who belongs in this space. Oftentimes when our class roster includes students with specific physical accommodations, we will return from the summer to discover new furniture in our rooms to accommodate those students.

As I entered the art room, I quickly noticed something I had not seen before — a desk with a plexiglass shield attached to it. This desk sat at the very back corner of the room, clearly separated from the remainder of the classroom desk configuration. What's up with that desk back there? I asked my friend. I quickly learned that for students unable to wear or keep their masks on, would be separated from the class and sat behind these plexiglass contraptions to minimize the risk of contact.

While these measures help to ensure the continued health and safety of those students and staff in the room, the repercussions of sitting isolated from the rest of the class should be obvious. With goals of socialization and socio-emotional health sitting at the forefront of educational experiences for students with exceptional physical or cognitive needs, a schooling experience where these students are physically separated from their peers has effectively interrupted our efforts to design inclusive spaces for our students.

As our educational communities continue to grapple with how best to support students in a system racked with uncertainty and instability, educators need to come together and search for ways to ensure that the human connections and collaborative supports that were in many ways interrupted by the global pandemic are revitalized.

COVID-19 exposed and, in some instances, exacerbated the inequities in the education system. Inclusive education is premised on the notion that *all* students feel they belong and have access to the supports required to ensure their academic success and overall wellbeing. What we have seen over the last year and a half is that these inclusive environments are inseparable from the relationships that are cultivated by human connections and supports within our schools.

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Notes

1 See for example Saskatchewan's Inclusive Education Policy (2021), Nova Scotia's Inclusive Education Policy (2019), Ontario's Equity and Inclusive Education Policy (2014)

2 Several Saskatchewan high schools shifted to a school year where students attended three classes a day over the course of approximately 10 weeks of study. Such dividing of courses into a quad as opposed to semester system limited the number of transitions in the day for students and teachers, thereby reducing the overall contact both students and teachers encountered in a day.

3 Saskatchewan's Safe Schools Plan outlined guidelines for schools using a four-level safe alternatives response model. Level 3 is characterized by reduced in-class learning for students, including the establishment of cohorts and hybrid learning models.

Self-checkout education

The deprofessionalizing, dehumanizing and demoralizing impacts of online education

Shannon D.M. Moore and Bruno de Oliveira Jayme

> As K–12 schooling moves out of buildings and onto the internet, we know that profiteers and hucksters will promote a commodified vision of teaching and learning.
> —*Rethinking Schools*, 2020, para. 7

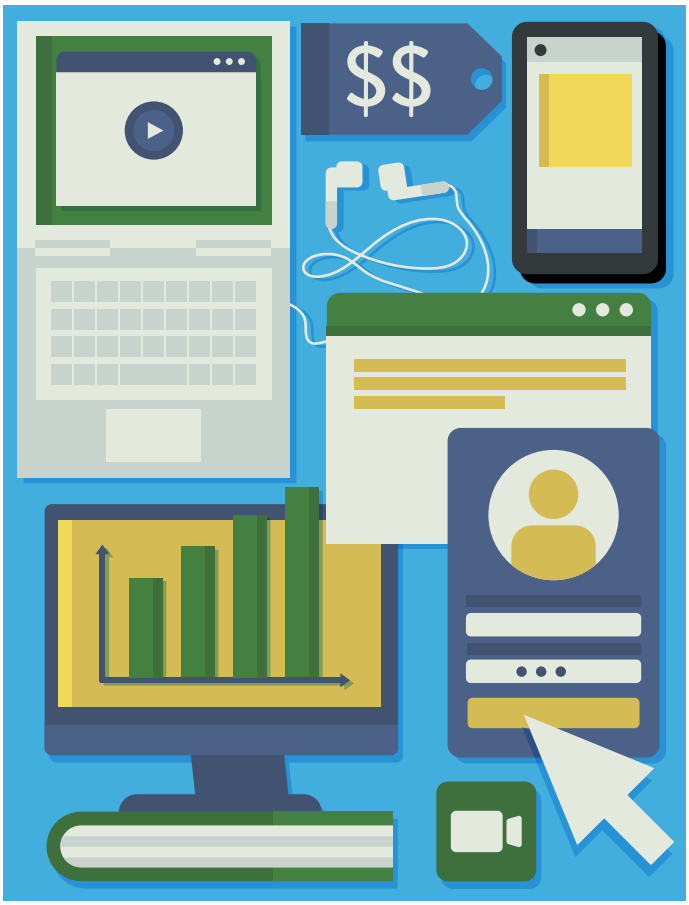
Education systems across Canada are increasingly impacted by neoliberal reforms which impose a business model on education that rationalizes defunding and encourages privatization. In what political theorist Wendy Brown terms 'the financialization of everything', neoliberalism positions knowledge as a commodity, students as consumers, education as workforce training, and schools as businesses.

Education is a key target of the neoliberal project for two reasons: the market size and the capacity to foster critical, engaged citizens.[1] These ideologically driven reforms ignore the purpose of education, and undermine the public system.

Neoliberal efforts to transform public education existed prior to the pandemic; however, the uncertainty of this moment has created openings to further these endeavors. Following the now familiar formula of *disaster capitalism*,[2] neoliberal reformers have used the chaos created by the pandemic to advance their interests. In particular, this has happened through the sudden, necessary investments in EdTech and concomitant online learning. Historically, moves to advance online learning have been political and economic rather than pedagogical.

Historical context: behind the screens

Since the mid 2000s, EdTech companies and neoliberal reformers have challenged the relevance of brick-and-mortar schools. These challenges follow the neoliberal formula of fabricating a crisis and offering a solution; in this case, rhetoric is used to make unfounded declarations about the inadequacy of face-to-face classrooms in/for the current economic and technological landscape.[3] Simultaneously, EdTech (learning management systems, applications, and platforms) is offered as a convenient, 'cost-effective' solution to 'modernize' the education system through increased online learning.



However, as Farhadi states, online learning has less to do with a revolutionary transformation of education than it does "with the expansion of global capital markets and the neoliberal restructuring of education."[4] There is money to be made from the digitalization of education; EdTech is valued at $1 billion annually and represents one of Canada's fastest growing startup sectors.[5] Moreover, online learning is seen as an opportunity to redirect public money to private companies. Online learning requires that school boards increase public investment in private corporations through the purchase of devices, applications, platforms, learning management systems, and long-term licensing agreements.

Plugging along

Before a global pandemic required school boards across Canada to invest in EdTech and move online, online learning was not a popular option in the K-12 system. Online learning was neither provincially imposed nor widely adopted; rather, most often, high school students self-selected online courses to supplement their school schedules, or improve their grades. As a result, there is minimal research and literature in this area generally, and an utter lack of critical scholarship in the K-12 context specifically.[6] There is no evidence from research that supports online education as a replacement for face-to-face teaching in the K-12 context.[7]

Despite the lack of research, investments in e-frastructure made through the pandemic are now being used to mobilize online learning across Canada. For example, in March of 2021, the Manitoba government prioritized a provincial remote-learning strategy, a bilingual online high school, and hinted at a provincial K-8 virtual school. In the same month, the government of Ontario renewed commitments to increase online learning. This, despite the fact that prior to the pandemic, the government's proposal to mandate four online courses faced overwhelming opposition from parents, students and teachers.[8]

Efforts to advance online learning are occurring in the absence of research about its impacts. Currently, public discourse about online learning is largely informed by neoliberal reformers, big tech companies, investors and technology providers.[9] Recognizing the dearth of critical research about the impacts of online learning on teachers and teaching, particularly in the K-12 context, we conducted a study in our province in 2020; the findings offer important counters to the celebratory rhetoric of 'modernization' and the propaganda issued by EdTech companies.

Teachers' homework

Through an interview-based study, *Teachers' Homework: Online Learning Through COVID19*, we spoke to 14 teachers from across Manitoba about their experiences "pivoting" to an online environment. Within the one-hour semi-structured interviews, we explored how the move to online platforms through the pandemic impacted educators' engagement with the curriculum, and their overall pedagogy. The teacher participants, of various grades and subjects, raised concerns about the impact of online learning on their profession/alism, on students, and on the larger project of education.

Three major themes emerged in the data.

Teacher participants felt deprofessionalized by:

- the lack of consultation. Choices surrounding technology and scheduling were made without their professional input.
- the functionality of the technology imposed on teachers. The platforms restricted,

dictated and limited the participant's capacity to engage with students, and with the curriculum.

Teacher participants felt demoralized by:

- their complicity in reproducing inequities. Teachers were unable to respond to the particular needs of their students.
- the erosion of relationships. Online, the participants found that they often resorted to methods and practices that did not align with their understanding of the purpose of education.

Teacher participants raised concerns about the ways in which online learning contributes to:

- the dehumanization of students. Absent body language and eye contact, and amidst technologically restricted interactions, teacher participants felt that they did not come to know their students.
- the disembodiment of learning. The teacher participants felt that the online platforms cut out an essential element of learning, the body.

We offer a more fulsome analysis of these findings below.

Deprofessionalizing

It's severely impacted my relationship with students, you know. I don't see their faces, I don't always recognize the sound of their voice. I can't identify their work by looking at it. I don't know what they're thinking. I can't see facial expressions, so I don't know how to read any of them anymore. I don't know how to anticipate their needs. Like, I don't have a sense of who they are.

—Participant, Riley, lines 489–493

The majority of the teacher participants in our study spoke of the ways that the functionality of online platforms influenced their practice, reducing their pedagogy to administrivia and management. Coerced and confined by technology, the participants adopted practices that did not align with their informed understandings of the purpose of education. Rather than spending time engaging with students, teachers filmed and edited videos, crafted communications, managed technology, and audited and surveilled students. Unbeknownst to many students, current technology offers analytic functions that track the number of times students have logged on, the duration, and the precise time they upload work.[10] As Stephen Ball warns, the insidious managerialism, built directly into technology, recasts teaching as the regulation of students. In turn, professionalism is redefined by what can be measured and rewarded, rather than by reflection, principles and judgment.[11] These neoliberal approaches supplant teacher knowledge and ethical responsibility with output and production. Moreover, they mistake automation for professionalism.

All of the teacher participants in our study stated that they had very little, if any, education specific to online teaching. This reflects a lack of understanding of the professionalism required in teaching generally, and of online teaching specifically. Online pedagogy requires new relationships, knowledge, and methodologies.

Teaching has historically been deprofessionalized, constructed as 'natural', conflated with femininity, and understood as an extension of the unpaid work of motherhood. These gendered constructions also impact the way teacher's ethical concerns about online learning are addressed. As Santoro explains, "the feminization of teaching impacts the ability of teachers' moral concerns to be heard as ethical claims, rather than simply self-interested forms of resistance."[12] The deprofessionalization (feminization), devaluing and dismissal of teachers is part of the ongoing neoliberal formula to silence critique and mobilize privatization through increased online learning.

The desire to monetize public education requires that the professionalism of teachers be placed in doubt, that their interests be questioned, and that their unwillingness to embrace technology be associated with their reluctance to 'modernize'. Yet, teachers in our study raised important ethical concerns about online learning that need to be heard before provinces further transform education.

Demoralizing

I'm just another school course, on a device, which isn't real.…They have no real human connection to me, and so it's easy to blow off and to ghost people that you don't value. And to value someone, often comes from having meaningful in person interactions.

—Participant, Charlie, lines 377–380

The teacher participants in our study offered many critiques of online learning. In particular, they overwhelmingly spoke about the ways that it deepened inequities, abandoned students with exceptionalities, and curtailed critical analysis, deliberation and dialogue.

Overall, online learning limited or restricted relationships, particularly between students. Yet, students need meaningful interactions with people in their classroom community, not just "access" to materials.[13] Relationships with classmates help to humanize issues of inequity, to foster empathy, and to encourage collective responsibility. With limited opportunities to connect, online learning is often reduced to the completion of individual assignments; this confuses credentialing with education and, in turn, inculcates individualism and competition.

Moreover, by emphasizing efficiency and replicability, online learning relies on the repetition and regurgitation of information, and the mechanization and technicization of knowledge — all of which encourages students to neglect criticality and simply produce and reproduce. This naturalizes neoliberalism, and ensures there are fewer critically oriented citizens. Neoliberalism targets education for this very reason.

Through transmissive pedagogy, particular knowledge is normalized — alongside passivity. If, as current literature suggests, the intent of education is to encourage critical and creative thinking, motivate student inquiry, foster relationships, develop problem solving skills, and practice discussion and deliberation, online learning in its current form misses the mark completely.

Dehumanizing

...the freaking Google Hangouts notification I think will be in my nightmares for the rest of my life where I want to help each and everyone of those kids, and the tyranny of that noise, and they make it seem they make it seem so efficient and so fluid. And it's actually so awkward and time-consuming and restrictive.
—Participant, Jules, lines 206–209

The participants in our study spoke of the "hostility" of online education. They were haunted by: the constant interruptive beeps and notifications emanating from the platform; the persistent tech glitches; the technological control offered to the teacher; and the awkward group communications filled with reminders of "you're muted". This, they said, negates the humanity required in teaching and learning.

This was a persistent theme across the interviews, the way online learning dehumanized students and disembodied learning. EdTech developers position students as "users" and sources of data. As dataveillance increases, and the collection and analysis of student data becomes routine, student value is derived from the commodification of data assemblages.[14] The data collected profits EdTech companies; however, it also alters student's understanding of educational worth, of societal values, and of themselves. Students start to perform to please the indicators, and teachers come to see their students as data points.

Control-Alt-Delete

Fundamental changes to education are being made absent of empirical research that supports wide scale adoption of online learning in the K-12 context, or that outlines sound pedagogical practices online. As Dr. Beyhan Farhadi bluntly states, 'we know virtually nothing about online learning'. If the participants in our study are any indication, now is the time to pause, and further our understanding of the impacts of online learning before letting the robots into the schoolhouse.

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Healthy schools need food-secure students

Rachel K. Brickner, Rebecca Casey, Elisabeth Rondinelli, Lesley Frank, and Sarah Rudrum

The *2021 Report Card on Child and Family Poverty in Nova Scotia* tells us that before the pandemic (in 2019) 24.3% of Nova Scotia children were living in low-income households,[1] and about one in five Nova Scotian children were living in food-insecure homes.[2] No doubt this has been exacerbated by unemployment and other income-related factors brought on by the pandemic, though we will have to wait for 2020 poverty data to confirm this. However, new data about food insecurity shows higher rates during the pandemic for households with children (19.2%) compared to households with no children (12.2%).[3] Beyond financial constraints, increased demand for food resources coincided with fewer places to get food.[4] Marginalized communities continue to be disproportionately harmed, as are single parent-led households (mostly women) and workers in the service industry.[5]

Outside of the family, the daily effects of childhood food insecurity unfold at schools. Research prior to the pandemic shows poorer diets and psychosocial outcomes among Nova Scotian students who are food insecure, compared to those who are not.[6] In the absence of centrally funded, organized, or administered school food programs in Canada, a decentralized network of food programs, supported by teachers, administrators, and parents, have mobilized for decades to fill the gap. When schools closed during the COVID-19 pandemic, food programs lost space and resources and had to adjust to reach students directly.[7]

Educators are themselves impacted by their deep concerns for students who may have lost access to those programs. Data from our study of essential workers during the pandemic reveal that teachers view themselves as intermediaries between the schools where they work and the students who they teach and for whom they care.[8] For students, access to school and, by extension, access to teachers, represents

access to crucial systems of support, including food and mental health services. When this access is limited, students and teachers suffer. We argue that the pandemic has revealed the dangers of relying on the care of individual teachers and school lunch programs as the key arbiter of whether children eat or not. We echo calls from educators, advocates, and researchers for a systemic policy response to food insecurity among young people and their families.

Schools as sites of care

Schools are sites of care and not solely sites of learning. Literature on the care economy often focuses on early childhood education,[9] but educators at all levels are entrusted with the care of students' physical, intellectual, and emotional well-being. While research shows that forms of inequality can be perpetuated within educational systems,[10] teachers in our study reported an ongoing sense of care for the wellbeing of their students.

One rural middle school teacher who participated in our survey captured certain aspects of the caring role of schools: "We feed a ton of kids whose families are impoverished. We are also a safe place for kids experiencing abuse and neglect." Indeed, food programs, supplemented by food provided personally by individual teachers, are an important way schools function as sites of care for students' well-being.

In our survey, 83% of teachers indicated that their school offered some type of food program prior to the pandemic. Of this number, 95% were teachers in rural areas and 66% were teachers in urban areas. Even though food programs were common in schools, they were negatively impacted by the pandemic: teachers reported that only 26% of food programs in their schools continued once the shift to remote teaching occurred, with fewer of these programs continuing in urban schools (10%) compared to rural schools (35%).

Teachers noted that the disruption of food programs had a range of negative impacts on students, including losing access to regular meals and the opportunity to socialize. One urban elementary teacher told us that: "Many students relied on schools for one or two meals per day. We also sent home food for supper at times. Families would have had to make difficult choices in order to get food for children during COVID-19. They would not be able to provide nutritious meals as often. There is also a social aspect to eating with others around a table that may have been lost." A rural high school teacher emphasized how lacking access to nutritious food "meant students no longer had a consistent meal schedule, even if it was through the breakfast program."

In their responses, teachers presented themselves as crucial providers of care, intermediaries whose work involves securing student well-being, who understood first-hand what was lost when students no longer had

access to the physical space of the school. A rural elementary teacher told us, "I had students who received food daily from school, who were provided a safe place at school, who needed school supports." Some teachers told us that this direct knowledge of their students' personal situations prompted them to take extraordinary actions, underscoring how much teachers view themselves as intermediaries between students and broader educational and social systems. An urban elementary teacher told us: "I ended up dropping off groceries to some families because I knew there were deficiencies in nutrition."

The pandemic represented an abrupt shift in teachers' ability to enact their caregiving role, and this negatively impacted their own well-being. In our study, 65% of teachers indicated a high level of concern for students' general well-being since schools closed. More than half (56%) of the teachers indicated that once schools closed, their own mental health was negatively impacted by their concern for student well-being. More than a third (39%) told us that this concern impacted their physical health. Additionally, 30% of teachers told us that during the period when they worked remotely, they thought more often about quitting.

The disruption of food and other supports for vulnerable students was at the root of this worry. An elementary school teacher in an urban area shared that, "I have students whose main source of food, clothing, and love was school. Knowing that they were at home in less than adequate situations was heartbreaking and worrying." A rural high school teacher told us: "I worry that some of my students are not safe in their homes, that they are not eating, and that they are experiencing big issues without the guidance of supportive adults in their lives."

Rethinking schools as the default solution for students' caring needs

The pandemic underscored the role that school food programs and individual educators play in providing for students' well-being. One rural teacher who teaches multiple grades listed the supports students were missing during the pandemic: "breakfast program, guidance, school [...] school nurse, exercise, socialization, positive interactions." This critical role highlights an important tension: while schools and teachers want to work to support the whole student, they are not equipped to operate as stand-alone safety nets — nor should they be.

School closures during the pandemic called attention to the inadequacy or absence of supports for school-aged children elsewhere in their communities. Teachers themselves have been at the forefront of calls to address the deficiencies of public policy that make it harder for students to learn and, consequently, harder for teachers to teach. In British Columbia, teachers have supported rights-based and universal approaches to food programming that connect food security to other outcomes, including positive mental health.[11] In the recent provincial election, Educators for Social Justice-Nova Scotia (ESJ-NS) called on parties to address child poverty, noting that "As education workers, we see the effects of child poverty every day. Giving children the things they need to thrive early in life is an investment."[12] ESJ-NS also called for policy solutions to the housing crisis, noting that "our students can't learn if they don't have homes."[13]

School food programs are an important component of care infrastructure, but public policy must address deficiencies in broader social and economic policy so that students and the teachers who care for them can be healthy. Insufficient resources amid complex student needs can lead to "burnout, compassion fatigue, and low levels of job satisfaction" among teachers, diminishing their capacity to engage in even the "fundamental practice of care that students need for learning."[14]

Relying on schools to make up for the shortcomings of public policy is not fair to schools, teachers, or students. Our data echo a Royal Society of Canada Policy Briefing: "the well-being of educators cannot be divorced from the well-being of the children and youth in their charge."[15] School lunch programs are important for increasing access to food for children, but they are not a defense against food insecurity. For schools to be healthy, the well-being of teachers and other school staff and students requires our attention. In the case of food insecurity, this means acknowledging that individual responses to a broad social problem are insufficient and costly. Teachers are raising the alarm for a renewed commitment to child and family well-being that is supported by adequate social safety nets and a systematic approach to food security, so students and teachers can flourish in learning together.

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“We do what must be done”

Disrupting the language of cultural capital in schools: Black mothers’ standpoint

Tanitiã Munroe

Over several months, I had the opportunity to speak with various Black Canadian mothers about their experiences navigating the K-12 education system in Toronto. Whether discussing their efforts to end any of the “isms” (i.e., racism, sexism, classism) they encountered in meetings with classroom teachers, to ensure the safety and wellbeing of their child or family member, or to navigate COVID-19, what became clear in the conversations are strategies Black mothers consistently use to advocate for their children.

During these sessions, my position as researcher began to fade, and it became difficult to contend with who I am and the institution I represent. I reflected on my own experience as a Black queer immigrant and mother, who not so long ago became a buffer and defender for my children when they were part of the school community. The “it takes a village” approach was a common thread that bound us. It was used to level the scales of micro-aggression and antiBlackness that became a staple in our/their lives as parents and the lives of our children and others in our communities. I was surrounded by women that provided cultural, educational, social, and personal guidance for the Black family — both in and out of their own homes.

As I sat and listened, I thought about our society’s recurring ideas about Black motherhood, from expectations like being “superwoman” to stereotypes like the “mammy” trope. Black mothers’ identities as parents have been historically bound by Eurocentric norms and societal assumptions and expectations.

Not only do Black mothers grapple with constant surveillance, but there has always been a negative stereotype attached to their identity and doubt about whether they can provide the “right” care for their children. These negative constructs of Black women’s capacity as parents bleed into the school environment.

For these reasons, among others, Black mothers continue to share a deep distrust of schools and educators. Their presence and advocacy remain a negotiation that creates far-reaching sociopolitical implications and impacts them emotionally; it also inhibits their ability to participate in the school community.

COVID-19

"It's been hectic for me as a single mom, especially navigating this whole pandemic," one mother in the focus groups shared. "I have had to rely on my kid's grandparents many times to help. Sometimes, I had to stay at home." Another chimed in, "I remember telling their teacher about my work situation and why I couldn't be on top of things more. I could literally sense the judgment in her response."

Though schools shifted their approach to support all students during the pandemic, participants spoke about learning how to inhabit a different understanding of motherhood to navigate their child's school life during COVID-19. Marked by anticipation, grief, death, loss, unemployment, and uncertainty, these Black mothers noted how the disruption fell particularly hard on their lives and their children who already faced barriers in their learning. In telling their stories, I thought about Jennifer C Nash (2021) and her framing of crisis "through which Black mothers and Black motherhood become visible." Collectively, I bore witness to and learned the complex ways Black mothers engage with the discourse of crisis that became intensified as the coronavirus spread.

Every Black mother who shared their story understood they have different experiences from their non-Black peers based on their identity markers, which continue to impact how they see themselves as concerned parents or family members, and how they interpret the schooling experience for themselves and their children before and during the pandemic.

The education space and its actors continued to operate in ways that were not responsive to — or supposedly responsive to — the "crisis" (Nash, 2021) of care and the needs of Black children. Every Black mother who shared their story understood they have different experiences from their non-Black peers based on their identity markers, which continue to impact how they see themselves as concerned parents or family members, and how they interpret the schooling experience for themselves and their children before and during the pandemic. The complex and arduous emotional labour tied to reframing who Black mothers are or who staff perceived them to be was intensified. Therefore, to understand how the COVID-19 pandemic informed the expression and experiences of Black families within education is to also understand its impact on the lives of Black mothers.

Black cultural capital: How is it taken up in school communities?

"Raising children is hard but raising a Black child who faces daily assaults on their very being is especially hard. When this happens in the school system, and you try to get involved, it increases your anxiety dealing with them… you get dismissed," one mother told me.

Not only do Black mothers feel the staff downplay their involvement in their children's education, but they feel the validity of their concerns are also questioned. Among the participants, it was clear that expressing their emotions or drawing on their social currency in schools had serious consequences. For many, successfully navigating the school system means engaging in a place where their cultural tastes are not welcomed or appreciated. By relying on narrow understandings of Black cultural capital, schools often position Black families as deficient, and continue to deny the value and validity of Black mothers' involvement or the ways they support their children's education.

Even as participants listed their school-based parental involvement practices and spoke of the long history of organizing by Black mothers, they recounted feeling subject/ed to the same exclusion their children face. Black mothers described experiencing microaggression, antiBlackness and silencing in school spaces, including school council, where they described how their support and expertise were dismissed, diminished, and rejected. To most of these Black mothers, schools became a site of visible Black trauma.

However, even as they expressed all their negative experiences, compassion remained a mainstay in the conversation among the women. Among each other, they disclosed the ways we as Black mothers refused stereotyping and fought back. Each took turns to share the resources, knowledge, and tools they had, to fill in the gaps and create potential solutions to support their children. This was indeed a reference to *our* capital, to the way of life inherent to Black communities and more importantly a reminder that the role of "mother" is not relegated to a single individual.

Their insights led me to think about the ways Black mothers have historically drawn on our

maternal instincts and strengths from our own communities. Black mothers have borne life's burdens *together*. We have consistently leaned into networks wherever the Black women gathered (i.e., porches, in kitchens, churches, hair salons). The investment and success of all Black children came through a system of caring Black women — blood relatives, or not — and remains rooted in community structures outside of the Eurocentric concept of family and parenting.

Black mothers' standpoint

"We always had to navigate the world in peculiar ways. Add being a single mom like myself trying to raise your child in this racist education system, while these teachers and principals look down on you. Even with this pandemic, we do what must be done though."

This reflection captures a racist and classist perception associated with Black identities — an assumption in society that renders Blackness synonymous with material and cultural poverty. Black mothers are reminded daily that motherhood is still perceived and constructed as a white, heteronormative ideology which positions motherhood as a private entity, and child-raising the exclusive responsibility of women in nuclear family settings.

The denial of who they are, and the legacy of struggle they use to counter and interrupt the dominant discourse attached to their parenting and school engagement is part of the everyday experiences of Black mothers (Collins, 1989). Black motherhood also serves as a site where Black women express and learn the power of self-reliance. For many who resist the burdensome condition in K-12 environments, their interactional style, knowledge, and individual agency remain a capital that is aspirational, familial, linguistic, navigational, social, and resistant (Yosso, 2005).

It also signals to institutional gatekeepers that Black mothers care deeply for and intimately understand their children and their needs, and will do whatever it takes to ensure they thrive. It is a core identity they carry with them in the hallways and classrooms of schools and pass along to their children.

Conclusion

How Black mothers negotiate school communities is often directly informed by how the system responds to race, class, sexual orientation, and gender identities. Black mothers describe schools as a place where they feel unwelcome and excluded in spaces and places, and where their cultural wealth and assets (spirituality, kinship network, family) were often dismissed or pathologized, even before COVID-19. And while it exposed the longstanding experiences of antiBlackness and inequalities faced by Black mothers in schools, the pandemic presented new challenges.

However, during COVID-19 Black mothers revealed the duality of strength and advocacy, remaining powerful, strong, capacious, creative, and spiritually rooted — despite a pandemic amplifying the sometimes-harsh reality of their identities in K-12 schools. Through a reliance on community and family networks, and collective approaches to raising Black children passed down as survival mechanisms between community matriarchs, they will continue to enact their agency to make the radical practice of Black mothering visible in education spaces and among staff.

Black mothers remind us each day that it is never only about undoing stigma and correcting false narratives; it is also about disrupting public discourse on Black cultural capital, parenting and motherhood.

To all the Black mothers I spoke with, I owe much gratitude to you for openly sharing the experiences of love, joy, courage, honesty, and pain you have encounter/ed while supporting your children in a space that's often unwelcoming.

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The more things change, the more they stay the same

Adult education during the pandemic

Kara Babcock

When people ask me what I do, I say, "I teach high school… to adults." If I just say I teach adults, most people assume I'm referring to post-secondary education; if I just say I teach high school, that erases the different population of learners I serve.

Adult & continuing education (A&CE) is often overlooked in our discussions of public education, and that has never felt truer than in the past year and a half. When schools in Ontario closed in March 2020 and then shifted classes to synchronous virtual learning, the experience of public education for most teachers, students, and parents changed dramatically.

But for me as an A&CE teacher, it felt like nothing had changed.

Let me describe an average teaching day for me pre-pandemic. My first class begins at 9:15 AM. Students gradually filter in, many arriving late due to vagaries of bus schedules, child care issues, and various appointments. I start my lesson on time for those who arrive punctually, and I try to catch up those who come in late. Over the next 2.75 hours, we work through a high school English or math lesson. After a half-hour lunch I do it all over again until 3:15 PM. Sometimes, I would teach simultaneously to students in the classroom and to students either at home or in another classroom at a remote site — what we are now calling hybrid learning. Of the 28.25 hours for which I am paid per week, 45 minutes of that is dedicated towards unscheduled preparation time.

That's right: we A&CE teachers were already operating in ways similar to what many primary and secondary teachers across Ontario were required to shoulder through the pandemic.

Quadmesters of eight week courses, two classes a day. Hybrid learning comprising students both in-class and virtually at the same time. Little-to-no prep time. None of these are new to me. So when I heard we would be teaching either entirely virtually or in a hybrid mode for the 2020–21 school year, I didn't blink. Other than the extra health and safety protocols, nothing had really changed for me as an A&CE teacher.

But *everything* had changed for my adult learners.

My learners come from diverse backgrounds. They range in age from 18 to their late 60s. Most have families. A high proportion are Indigenous. Others are newcomers to the country, sometimes refugees from situations far more traumatic than I could imagine. They bring decades of experience into my classroom.

Like their backgrounds, their goals are diverse too. Most need an Ontario Secondary School Diploma to change careers or begin one. Others seek a specific course for college or university admission. I've even had a few students who are simply there to *graduate* so that they can say they have. Whatever their origins and their plans, we accept these learners into our classrooms and work with them to help them succeed.

When the Ontario Ministry of Education reacted to the pandemic by closing schools and shifting to virtual classes, my adult learners found themselves in a very difficult position. Parents had to supervise their kids, now learning at home alongside them — and that's assuming their household had access to enough technology and Internet bandwidth for both parent and children to attend school at the same time. Many of my students also had to balance attending virtual school with being frontline workers. Finally, as any teacher and many students and parents will attest, interactions on a screen are just *not the same* as learning in person. Technical difficulties, privacy considerations, and the stress of the pandemic all made it so much harder for me to give my students the one-on-one support they deserved.

The shape of Ontario public education during this pandemic has not been random, and it did not have to be haphazard. What has changed — and what hasn't — has been a deliberate policy decision, not an inevitable outcome of exigent circumstances.

Despite all this, some of my learners appreciate these different learning models. For them, an attendance requirement is an insurmountable barrier even though they could otherwise succeed in my course. The most important skill I have developed in my years as an A&CE teacher has been flexibility. My adult learners need it, and younger learners need it too.

Yet this flexibility has not generally been forthcoming. One example would be the Ministry of Education's mandate for a daily minimum of synchronous learning time. Educators and students at every level struggled with this expectation and the resulting screen time. My days were measured by the burnout I felt the moment I could switch off my camera at 3:30 PM. I felt like I wasn't possibly doing enough for my students. In reality, I was doing my best with the resources and directives we had been provided. All of us could have benefited from the Ministry acknowledging that virtual school is more than just a different method of delivery.

The shape of Ontario public education during this pandemic has not been random, and it did not have to be haphazard. What has changed — and what hasn't — has been a deliberate policy decision, not an inevitable outcome of exigent circumstances.

We must keep this in mind as we look to the future of our education system. If we create policy with flexibility and equity in mind, we can change all levels of education for the better. For my particular area, this means according A&CE teachers the same level of recognition — in our working conditions and our pay — as other teachers in Ontario. It also means considering how we can be flexible in our funding and attendance models to serve the needs of our adult learners. Finally, it means more explicit and frequent acknowledgement of the important role adult and continuing education serves in our society — and funding to support that message.

More broadly, our conversations around change in education must be nuanced and acknowledge that education cannot be one-size-fits-all. If we create policy around the idealized student with fibre broadband, the latest tech, and no distractions at home, we will miss the mark on what education should be: a tool for removing barriers rather than reinforcing them.

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Five limitations to the pandemic online learning model in Ontario

Darryl Newbury

"Good morning class, it's so nice to see your first initials today." This is how I greeted my class every day from April to June 2021, after we were required to pivot entirely to remote teaching and learning, changing our teaching model for the fourth and final time of the 2020–2021 school year.

It is not a surprise that a global pandemic would have an impact on the working conditions for teachers. That said, nearly 20 years as a secondary school teacher employed by the York Region District School Board did little to prepare me for all of the ways in which pandemic teaching would shape my experience in the classroom. The adaptive model, which was designed for schools with a higher risk of COVID-19 transmission, may have looked different in different boards; however based on my discussions with colleagues in other parts of the province, it universally did not work for students, and created workload challenges for teachers. Here are five limitations to the model as my students and I experienced it.

1.

Inconsistency in the delivery of curriculum

The Secondary Adaptive Model required teachers to deliver the curriculum in a variety of formats. In the York Region District School Board, where I teach, we continued with a semester model during the

2020–2021 school year, with one face-to-face period for two and half hours in the morning, followed by three online classes in the afternoon for 50 minutes each (one of which would be our prep period). The class that we saw in person rotated about every two weeks and students were cohorted into groups of up to 15, attending school on alternate days. This meant that teachers would be expected to deliver curriculum synchronously both in person and online as well as providing students with asynchronous work on the days when their cohort stayed home. By design, the most a student would ever see their teacher in person over a semester was 11 times, and that does not account for any public health measure that could be put in place, ranging from province wide lockdowns to a cohort being sent home as a result of potential exposure to Covid. Switching between face to face learning, synchronous online learning and asynchronous learning was inconsistent for students and created workload challenges for teachers who had to constantly prep lessons for the different delivery models.

2.

Inability to build community in the classroom

The structure of the school year schedule made it exceedingly difficult to build community in the classroom. As a result of our rotational model, the first time I met my period 4 class in person was late October, after we had been together online for nearly two months. This made it virtually impossible to create a learning environment in which students would feel safe to express themselves freely in the classroom, either when they were face to face or online. As a history, social science and philosophy teacher, I am used to vibrant debate and discussion in the classroom. I found the lack of student engagement brought on by the disjointed nature of the adaptive model particularly challenging.

3.

Lack of structure for learners

The way the schedule was designed did not provide students with the structure needed for meaningful learning. Firstly, as students only attended school on alternate days, the expectation that they would have the self-discipline, or support at home, to asynchronously learn on the alternate morning was unrealistic. Further, the 50 minute time slots for online learning in the afternoon made teaching and learning feel further disjointed. Between the time it was taking for students to get into the Google Meet, attendance-taking, answering questions, etc, it was difficult to get much more than 30 minutes of instruction time in any given online class.

4.

Technological learning challenges and inequalities

The students who attended school in the Secondary Adaptive Model were those whose families chose for them to continue with in person learning during the pandemic. Our board did offer a separate virtual school for families who chose to have their children do all of their schooling online. It's reasonable to assume that one of the reasons some families chose the adaptive model, rather than virtual school, was

the recognition that all teenagers do not have the self-regulation skills to successfully learn in an online environment. While teaching online I experienced everything from a student inadvertently unmuting her video game — in the middle of my lesson — to the more regular occurrence of students simply not responding to direct questions, which suggested that at least some of them logged on to get their attendance checked and then went off to do something else (students were not required to keep their cameras on during class due to privacy concerns). Socio-economic inequalities also made it challenging to support learners in the adaptive model because not all students have access to the same technological resources. For some students, networks were regularly unstable; for others the background noise from their home made it obvious that their attention was divided between class and caring for younger siblings.

5.
Hybrid Learning Model

After the challenges classroom teachers faced during the 2020–2021 school year we hoped that September 2021 would bring more normalcy to our working conditions. We were wrong. Citing operational objectives, our Board chose to introduce a hybrid model, which requires one teacher to attend to students in a virtual classroom and in-person classroom simultaneously. This recommendation ignored an internal report which identified the fact that this model would most negatively impact at-risk students. So here we are, months into the second full school year of a pandemic and once again teacher working conditions have been altered. The hybrid model forces teachers to divide their attention between in school and online students which, in my case, means that I have as many as 28 students in my classroom and three online students attempting to learn from home. With that ratio there is no feasible way to effectively engage and incorporate a few online learners while meeting the needs of a classroom full of face-to-face learners. This system does not work and it is possibly the most unconscionable policy decision that I have experienced in my teaching career.

Over the past two school years, I have witnessed some of the most competent and confident teachers I know being reduced to tears by the exhaustion brought on by conditions in which we are expected to teach. Nobody asked for any of this. Students did not ask for the multitude of disruptions to their young lives. And teachers certainly did not ask for the stress of constantly changing working conditions, or the inescapable anxiety brought on by the possibility that our working lives could severely impact our health through the very real risk of Covid exposure. This was particularly the case when Covid case counts were rising and the government was being far too slow to put safety measures into place.

While we can accept that some of what was experienced over the past couple of years was due to public health necessities, it seems that far too much of what was experienced in the schools during this pandemic was more the result of operational imperatives, some of which is a response to the underfunding of education. And student learning, as well as student and educator well-being, were the primary casualties.

Darryl Newbury is a York Region District School Board secondary history teacher. He is a committed unionist who serves as Branch President in his school and as a Vice President for Ontario Secondary School Teachers Federation (District 16). An avid hiker, he can often be found in nature trying to recharge from spending far too much time attached to technology since the beginning of the pandemic.

Challenging teacher fragility in the most fragile times

Christopher Klune

The past school year I was privileged to teach in three distinct environments with different groups of youth. The communities and classrooms in each teaching assignment had their unique nuances, though the thread that connected them all was the visible, and invisible, impacts of the pandemic. Economic precarity and the loss of loved ones penetrated classrooms. As the year went on, pandemic induced traumas exacerbated others, and students already facing racism, homophobia, transphobia, poverty, and other issues were made to bear even more.

It was the most discomforting year of teaching I've had. But it has ingrained in me the imperative for teachers to, even in the most difficult of times, overcome their own discomfort to build dialogical spaces where students' lived experiences are heard, valued, and meaningfully used to ask critical questions about how our world should be.

I oftentimes tip-toed around topics of systemic inequality in class. I did not want to deeply talk about racism, homophobia, or other topics because I was anxious and did not want to deal with their sensitive nature. I feared resistance and the responses I would have to deal with. Upon intense reflection, I realized these fears may have been valid, but they were rooted in deeply problematic thinking. I have come to understand that for myself it was a manifestation of white fragility: rather than address these topics I used the power of my position and privilege as a white male teacher to avoid the discomfort they may cause me in the classroom, at the expense of my students.[1]

It is doubly problematic that this line of thinking insinuates a dire false equivalence, prioritizing my anxieties about *talking* about systemic inequality, over actual lived experiences with it. As I entered the 2020/2021 year, I committed to do away with my hesitancy to re-centre students, to open a space for lived experiences, and to challenge students disassociated from these issues to think more critically about them.

My experiences combating my fragility over the year illuminated resistance, appreciation,

and deep learning. Trying to bring in perspectives from Black Lives Matter in several classes was an uphill endeavor in a small town Alberta school with no teachers of colour, but clearly there was a need for it:after these classes some of my students disclosed the overt and invisible racism they experience at school. They expressed not anger, but a desire to have more teachers to educate their peers — a sentiment truly indicative of their courage and our failures.

Deep discussions and actions at the school occurred after that, but as my contract ended I found myself in an Edmonton school as the remains of 215 Indigenous children at the Kamloops Residential School site were discovered. In a class discussion two students characterized this horrific discovery as 'not their problem.' As I challenged their reaction an Indigenous student exclaimed that this attitude was the *exact* problem, and they could never understand the pain. I'll never forget the silence that occurred and the distinct shift in tone. Afterward, students wanted to learn more, and asked questions about the residential school system. It was not that student's burden to educate her peers, but her reaction was more deeply affecting than anything I could teach.

In June, Joyce Echaquan's coroner's inquest concluded. I decided to discuss this in a Grade 9 class. Few students were aware of Echaquan's story and, upon being informed, their shock filled the room. The class was spent discussing systemic racism and sharing some heartbreaking lived experiences confronting it, including acts of violence and erasure. Later, a group of students disclosed that racism and other forms of discrimination are a daily reality for them at school, and they appreciated a class where they were able to share their views and experiences. Keep in mind: it was June — the end of the school year during a pandemic — and this was the first class that they felt heard. This only underscored the critical need to challenge teacher hesitancy.

The benefit of centring difficult topics in difficult times is twofold: Students experiencing systemic oppression are offered a space where their experiences are centred, while students privileged from systemic issues are challenged to learn and confront assumptions.

Topics on systemic oppression can create — or expose — friction in the classroom — a friction many teachers, including myself, shy away from. Teaching is already an incredibly underappreciated and highly demanding job, so this line of reasoning is not entirely unfathomable. But it assumes that our classrooms and students are "better" and more harmonious when 'sensitive' topics are avoided.

Ultimately, I know what I'm writing here is nothing new, and is obvious to many. But it is still important. Notions of "teacher hesitancy" and the harm it perpetuates are real, but the burden of addressing challenging issues is still centered on individual students, teachers and schools. More systematic solutions and conversations deconstructing the harm teacher hesitancy and fragility causes is needed. Curriculum needs to be more reflective of the lived experiences of students. School boards and professional associations should be more intentional in forming policies and professional development to better equip all teachers to understand and approach "uncomfortable" topics.

This will be a challenge so long as other systemic barriers hamper public education: inadequate funding, large class sizes and lack of educational supports make our schools less conducive to initiating other changes. So long as these burdens go unaddressed, uprooting teacher fragility and enabling the ability to have difficult but needed conversations in the classroom will be an uphill battle. This presents critical policy and process challenges for educators, schools, and government — but one we must demand to elevate the voices and visibility of youth. It is imperative that teachers confront their discomforts even in discomforting times for students affected by systems of oppression. It should not take a pandemic to realize that.

Christopher Klune is a learner and educator through and through, believing a strong and equitable public education system is a cornerstone to human flourishing. He's taught in 3 countries at various grade levels and currently works at a nonprofit tackling food insecurity in schools. He prefers working with youth as adults are far more boring and don't laugh at his clever jokes.

Notes

1 DiAngelo, Robin. 2011. White fragility. *International Journal of Critical Pedagogy* 3 (3): 54–70.

Every test you take...I'll be watching you

Hyper-surveillance of students during the COVID-19 pandemic

Nadia Qureshi

In the late 90s after famous rapper Notorious B.I.G. died, Faith Evans and Diddy (known then as Puff Daddy) released the track "I'll be missing you" as a tribute. The song was a chart topper and favourite among my friend group. As pre-teens at the time, this song introduced us to the original 80s song "Every breath you take" by The Police that had been sampled. We discovered the lyrics,

> Every breath you take,
> Every move you make,
> I'll be watching you.

After we discovered this 80s song, we found ourselves debating whether this song was an endearing "watching you" or a sinister "watching you." Over 20 years later, the song jingle fills my head as I engaged in a similar debate with colleagues on the use of software to monitor students during assessment and testing situations.

The perspective of some educators and administrators is that this software supports students in preparing for similar situations in post-secondary and legislated exams (for example, the law bar, nursing board certification, etc.). They also claim it ensures equity so that students who can easily access resources do not have an advantage over others who cannot.

On the other hand, concerns have been raised about the negative impacts of such hyper-surveillance. Some of these softwares, (including the one I am required to use by my department), can lock students' browsers so that they cannot access the internet, email, messaging services or anything outside of the browser itself. Additionally, a webcam *records* their face, movements, and sounds during a test. Once the test is complete, the entire video footage is accessible to the teacher through the software to check for academic honesty.

Test taking is anxiety inducing for many students. To add this level of surveillance and scrutiny has negative consequences, even if they are unintended. Students have shared with me that they feel vulnerable and anxious, knowing that they are being watched so closely and sharing their home through cameras. Others have apologized on the video as it records,

for the state of their bedroom, or for being in a bathroom where their WiFi is strongest. As much as I have reassured students that I do not pay any mind to the environment, it is evident that they do not feel comfortable.

In my experience, this level of monitoring is not an *endearing* (helpful) "watching you" but instead quite a harmful one. Students have shared, "some of us don't do well under pressure, and knowing that a camera is recording your every move can be nerve racking." These harms are exacerbated for racialized students who already face increased surveillance in society,[1] whether out shopping, hanging out in parks, or riding public transit — people of colour are watched and stopped at greater rates than white people. The COVID-19 pandemic has reinforced many systemic inequities and surveillance in test taking has added to this.

My pedagogy and philosophy of teaching is informed by my identity as a woman of colour. Additionally, as a doctoral student researching access to post-secondary through a lens of critical race theory (CRT), the use of video monitoring software is antithetical to the ways in which I position myself as a researcher. At the same time, my position as a contract teacher has made it a challenge to raise these issues with other teachers and administrators who hold decision-making power. After my critiques were met with resistance, I ultimately have conceded to using a system I disagree with. I worry for the precedence this has set in other policies and requirements that may continue to follow from the top down.

It has become clear that the COVID-19 pandemic has shifted some teaching philosophies. As educational institutions were required to make sudden pivots in delivery, the speed and chaos at which this occurred has left some important issues unaddressed. Whatever side of this debate you fall on as an educator, administrator, policy maker, or any other role in education — what is clear is that there are many factors that need to be considered in making these decisions.

More student-centred consultations and focus groups should be held to understand how to best support students' learning conditions in the pandemic and beyond. While we have endured changing conditions in the pandemic for roughly the past 2.5 years, there is still much more we need to hear from students. I hear these perspectives in every lesson, and these voices are not being reflected in policy and decision making. Test taking and assessments can be reimagined in ways that do not require video surveillance. Instead, open book, collaborative, resource seeking assessments can be planned.

We can replace a culture of surveillance and mistrust with a culture of new and creative assessments. As we continue to move forward in this pandemic, my hope is that we think critically about our pedagogies and assessments, and the lasting impacts these will have.

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Notes

1 CBC Radio (August 9, 2018). The resistance of Black Canada: State surveillance and suppression. https://www.cbc.ca/radio/ideas/the-resistance-of-black-canada-state-surveillance-and-suppression-1.4553804 (Accessed November 30, 2021.)

“Isolated and disengaged”

The impact of racism on newcomer students and families during COVID-19: A conversation

Eric Keunne and Karamjit Sangha-Bosland

Eric Keunne: As someone who moved to Canada later in life and who is now working with newcomer students and families every day in the education system, I’ve been thinking about how the pandemic has impacted the lives of many and what kinds of support can be put in place now for increased engagement and success of students. Karamjit, you offer a unique perspective as someone who immigrated here as a child and has supported newcomer families in your career, do you think you can share some of your thoughts?

Karamjit Sangha-Bosland: Well, as a racialized educator and an advocate for human rights, equity and inclusive education, COVID-19 has also provided me an opportunity to pause and take the time to think about how we can centre student well-being. Listening to newcomer students over the years has made me revisit my own experiences of racism in school, everything from racial slurs to emotional and physical bullying in class with no interventions or support from my teachers. In my experience when educators sharpen their analysis of systemic racism, they can better understand how to support newcomer students in their classrooms and gain confidence to lead conversations and to disrupt racism in their classrooms.

Eric: During COVID-19, communication became harder for everyone since we were adjusting to a virtual learning environment. Did you notice gaps in listening to and providing support to students and families?

Karamjit: During COVID-19, newcomer families expressed how their children felt isolated and disengaged in school. In conversations with students and families it seems that they are lacking support in processing their individual experiences of exclusion and racism in schools. They would benefit from having school staff discuss how systemic racism may impact their lives. I remember being in their place as a young person. My family came to Canada from Punjab, India in the 1970’s. As with newcomer

students and families today, we were not provided the opportunity to learn about how the school system was historically rooted in colonization and entrenched in systemic racism. Newcomer students and families would feel more equipped to respond and understand the context under which their children experience racism if they were supported in this way.

Eric: I agree: as educators it is impossible to discuss how newcomer students face racism in school without taking time to understand Indigenous rights and the history of colonization in Canada, which established the foundation for systemic racism and the prevalence of white supremacy in the school system.

Karamjit: This alienation continues, and it is even more difficult for newcomer students who arrived in Canada in the middle of the pandemic. In communicating with their peers on a virtual platform, the students were hesitant in sharing their voices and therefore often remained silent in class. Not only were they developing their English communication skills during this time, they were also simultaneously trying to understand how they fit into this new school environment.

Eric: As teachers learning to support newcomer students in their transition to Canada, particularly during this pandemic, it is key that we remind ourselves of where they come from, and the experiences, gifts and limitless potential every single student brings. Classrooms can be places where newcomer students express themselves in the diversity and richness of their authentic identities, perspectives and life experiences. As educators we can centre voices that may have been pushed to the margins during COVID-19. The online learning environment often created a culture of disconnection between peers; screens off during learning, as they often were, made it more difficult for educators to provide students with opportunities for collaboration that might have been easier in pre-COVID times. Teachers struggled to get to know their students and to understand their learning needs, especially students who were learning English and did not have the fluency to advocate for themselves.

"...as educators it is impossible to discuss how newcomer students face racism in school without taking time to understand Indigenous rights and the history of colonization in Canada, which established the foundation for systemic racism and the prevalence of white supremacy in the school system."

Karamjit: I feel like during COVID-19 we as educators also learned how facilitating conversations about systemic racism and microaggressions in the classroom empowers students. Teachers shared that when they spent the time developing the skills and abilities to bring these discussions into their classrooms they noticed how their classrooms opened as spaces where students felt more confident to share their lived experiences.

Eric: Thank you for sharing that. When whiteness is never talked about, but always present, I wonder how a young, racialized student is supposed to make any sense of this, other than to internalize a sense of inferiority.

Karamjit: Yes right, newcomer students need their white teachers to equip themselves and speak up and challenge racism in their classrooms. However, they are often met with educators' silence, and this sends a strong message to students who are new to Canada that they do not belong. For me it felt like teachers did not think about our humanity as racialized students. Why did it feel that no one in the school cared about us?

Eric: Sadly, this is true today. As a Black educator and a Bamileke community leader, I would like my children's teachers to intentionally choose resources that reflect and represent my kids' racial identity and cultural heritage to ensure that they can connect with the learning in the classroom and feel a sense of pride. I have often been consulted to provide support and engage in painful conversations with newly arrived families about how to cope with the impact of racist language in schools, classrooms and communities. Families have come from all parts of the world during COVID-19, and a lot of complaints eventually surfaced as a result of the traumatizing experiences that some of them were going through. These families expressed concerns around repeated microaggressions they were subjected to (inappropriate jokes about their accents, setting low expectations for their children, ignoring their children during class discussions, assigning projects that ignored different identities in the class, singling out their children during class time because of their race etc.) All this while trying to navigate the online learning model.

Karamjit: Newcomer students needed more focused support during COVID. The switch to the online platform had teachers preoccupied

with changing their classroom pedagogy to accommodate a virtual learning environment. Educators are now called upon to embody a level of vulnerability as their awareness of social injustices develops. In our experience, when newcomer students experienced intense interrogation of systemic racism in their classroom, they felt more seen and heard.

Eric: Yes, exactly! When educators are engaged in learning themselves, they become more explicit and truthful in conversations with students about racism and this validates students' experiences. This realization allows teachers to recognize the humanity of their students and build trust and stronger relationships with them. COVID-19 contributed to an environment of fear and instability that did not encourage opportunities to build strong relationships between teachers and students. It did not encourage teachers to be critically conscious of their teaching practice.

Karamjit: Yes that is true, Eric, and I really think careful and thoughtful consideration needs to be placed/put around the gaps in different boards and schools' processes and procedures that often end up creating more challenges for newcomer students and families. COVID made it difficult for staff to support newcomer students and families. Community organizations were closed and unable to provide face to face guidance and advocacy. Sadly, programs and services that provide spaces where these families can learn how to address issues of racism that their children experience in the school system were not operational.

Eric: Exactly, and so we are a long way from equity and inclusion in our classrooms and schools. The COVID-19 pandemic has created more gaps in access to supports for newcomer students and families. I really believe that as educators, we need to protect and uphold the rights and dignity of all students and families. It is imperative that we educators acknowledge and embrace our responsibility to build equitable and inclusive classrooms and school communities.

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