



Organizing with radical love

Towards equity and social justice education in Alberta

The RAD Educators Network is a collection of educators working within a variety of contexts who are committed to equity and social justice education. We believe that educators, working within and outside formal education, have a vital role to play in helping students and teachers understand their role in reducing prejudice and discrimination, uplifting student voices, and advocating for more equitable and just educational policies and practices.

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Same struggle, but shifting contexts

At the time of writing, over one third of humanity is currently in lockdown due to the COVID-19 global pandemic and schools across the globe have transitioned to distance and online learning. Overnight, school buildings were closed, and students, families, and educators had to adjust to teaching and learning in a virtual space. Even though the context of learning may have shifted, the principles of great teaching and learning remain constant. Educators within the RAD Educators Network have taken up the challenge of educating in this new context while continuing to build connections, create community, and ensure that students in the margins of our education system are not left behind with the transition from face to face to remote learning.

This work exists in the context of an austerity driven government led by Jason Kenney who has made no secret of his goals for reduced public services in Alberta. As the threat of the

pandemic heightened, the premier used this as cover to criticize doctors, play politics with n95 masks and lay off 25,000 educational workers across the province. Tensions regarding public policies in Alberta — as in other parts of the world — have been on the rise since 9/11 and the financial collapse of 2008, and will now become even more pronounced due to the insecurity resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic. These events have led to conditions of economic, social, and political uncertainty that fuel a generalized anxiety, which has enabled neoliberal, far-right political agendas to flourish (Blackmore, 2019). In this context, education has become a key battleground, as it is perceived as having the capacity to either maintain or divide class position and ensure or deny social mobility (Blackmore, 2019).

Times of crisis, such as this, tend to create spaces of opportunity to rethink traditional ways of functioning and relating to one another as a part of a system. Never again, will people

believe that integral societal institutions cannot shift; it is instead a question of political will and urgency. How will this adjustment affect perceptions of education, what it means to learn, and ideas about the purpose of education moving forward? These shifts present openings to ask ourselves new questions, and opportunities to push for a more equitable and socially just education system for all students. However, this is also an opportunity for opposing forces to further entrench standardization and marketization of education with the idea that the purpose of education is to solely prepare students to participate in the economy.

The RAD Educators Network was established in 2018 out of a desire to create a supportive community for educators, with a broader goal of empowering them to continue this work in their own schools and workplaces. This is a critical moment for a network of educators committed to equity and social justice education to emerge.

What makes RAD, rad?

The work of RAD Educators is rooted in a conception of *radical love*. We learn, come to know, and exist in relation to those around us — our families, our communities, and so on. Like bell hooks, we believe that love necessarily entails telling the truth about the historical and continued effects of racism, colonialism, and other forms of oppression within fundamentally inequitable (and, thus, inherently violent) education (and other) systems, even those we ourselves might benefit from in some ways. For liberation movements to fully divest from systems of oppression, they need “love as the ethical foundation” (hooks, 1994/2006, p. 247).

Like Ibram X. Kendi (2019), we see radical love as a profoundly antiracist way of *relationally and actively* bringing about individual and social changes that will root out violent policies and practices that live at the intersections (Crenshaw, 1989) of racism, colonialism, capitalism, sexism, imperialism, ethnocentrism, homophobia, transphobia, and too many other forms of injustice and inequity. Considering current educational policies, like Kendi (2019), we ask, “What if we realized the best way to ensure an effective educational system is not by standardizing our curricula and tests but by standardizing the opportunities available to all students?” (p. 127).

Solidarity in the context of education

As we are considering how we might live, teach, and work from and with a relational

ethic of radical love, we also draw from the work of Paulo Freire (1970/2000) who asserted that “solidarity requires that one enter into the situation of those with whom one is in solidarity; it is a radical posture” (p. 49). Freire argued that true solidarity is an “act of love” (p. 74) as opposed to “paternalistic social action” which purports to be generous but is essentially a form of colonization. It is all too easy to impose upon others, even with good intentions. Instead of assuming we know the right answers and the best path, we strive to listen to the groups we wish to support and then work *with* them (rather than on their behalf).

RAD Educators discussed how we might resist the cuts to education that we knew would be harmful to teaching and learning — particularly for those already marginalized — and wondered how we could individually and collectively move ourselves and each other to fight inequity right now in our classrooms, schools, and educational systems? How could we move beyond what Dwayne Donald (2019) identified as the logics of *homo economicus* in a “North American settler dream imaginary” (p. 104) evidenced through the focus in mandated curriculum documents on individualism, progress, and anthropocentrism? We wondered how we might inspire ourselves and others to root out and confront inequity within our education system and move towards a practice of radical, relational love, specifically in context of the shifting paradigm of education during and after COVID-19. How can we approach this work in the spirit of radical love in order to transform the often harmful ways students experience inequity in our schools through poor pedagogy, standardized assessment, outdated curriculum, disciplinary practices and system oppression?

Much of our work in the last several months has been in building a community of resisters in response to the provincial government’s plans to defund, dismantle and even privatize education in Alberta. Cuts to funding, layoffs to educational workers and a stall on new curriculum for Alberta’s students are all taking place under the shadow of policies and statements by Premier Jason Kenney, and the Minister of Education, Adrianna LaGrange. The government’s prevailing mindset seems to see schools as indoctrination centers for youth, and public services as a commodity better handled by the private sector.

At the heart of our work is our desire to advocate for the students on the margins of our education system and society. These

young people will be the hardest hit as funds to education are cut, class sizes increase, and fewer supports are available to those who need them the most.

Creating opportunities for community

We know that this work is difficult and that many educators feel a sense of loneliness and isolation as resistance to progressive change — both within and from outside the profession — can be daunting. The RAD Educators Network sought to create a sense of community for those determined to teach for equity and social justice education over the long term.

Our first event was the RAD Educators Summer Gathering in 2018 where for three days over 30 educators from across the province built connections and engaged in dialogue with other educators on issues of equity and justice within education. We discussed everything: issues within the classroom, pedagogy, assessment, the school to prison pipeline, and more. Perhaps most importantly, this gathering began a process of building connections with and among educators across Alberta, working towards a more equitable and just education system for all.

Since our initial gathering, we started a private Facebook group to connect digitally and to share resources. We began hosting social nights to build relationships and provide educators with space to vent and blow off steam, and held “salons” with a mix of professors and teachers as guest speakers, followed by discussions. We also established a book club.

Recently, a few pre-service teachers approached us to host a circle gathering where

they could share their stories as emerging and new teachers. This event was a meaningful one, with participants commenting on how much they valued this space — physically and emotionally. Furthermore, we have also humbly attempted to uphold our responsibilities to treaty, the Truth and Reconciliation Commission and the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous peoples (UNDRIP) by publicly supporting the struggles of the Wet’suwet’en nation.

When schools closed on March 15th in Alberta due to the COVID-19 pandemic we knew that our community of educators would continue to desire a space to share and connect about how they were going to tackle transitioning to emergency remote learning. Many educators within our network were scrambling to advocate for an equitable and just approach to emergency learning and knew that, on top of everything they were going through personally, this added advocacy work could push educators to their limits. To support each other through this period of adjustment we established a weekly online community dialogue session. These sessions feature guests to help frame and discuss the nuances of emerging issues of equity in emergency remote learning such as how we approach connecting with students, maintaining relationships and learning and negotiating the calls for assessment during this crisis. We moved our book club online, and created a new writing project entitled, “Pencils Down” to provide educators a space to share their words and experiences of working for equity and social justice education.

Sustaining “the fight” and ourselves

As a network, we do not see ourselves as “radicals” in the word’s colloquial sense, although we have been branded as such by those who feel threatened by our message. It is not radical to understand that hatred (e.g., racism, transphobia, homophobia, ableism, sexism, etc.) impacts the lives of our students. We feel it is important to remind ourselves, as well as those we are trying to hold accountable, that it is not radical to see how students living in poverty face inequity within the system. It is not radical to grow capacity amongst our colleagues to defend and fight for a more just, equitable, and anti-oppressive public education system. We are teachers, community and adult educators, professors, early childhood educators and researchers who firmly believe that centring the issues of equity and social justice along with racial, economic and climate justice will allow



us to co-create with students the classrooms and schools that all young people deserve. It is essential to understand that our commitment to working for equitable and just schools for all requires us to uplift the voices and experiences of students in order to work alongside them and to understand the real needs of students.

We are learning that we have to consider what we might need to sustain ourselves and our members. A choir metaphor we encountered on social media resonated with us: Choirs can hold a note for a seemingly endless period of time not because every member holds the note the whole time, but because each person's voice comes in when it can, and when someone needs a break, another can take over. As such, the organizers openly communicate about how we are feeling with the stresses and strains of work and life, and take turns leading projects.

Working together for change

The RAD Educators Network works to create opportunities for those within and affected by the educational system to come together to discuss how we might work toward a system based upon equity, and then take appropriate action. Part of that work is finding fissures in the existing system and then exposing what is underneath. Moving forward after the COVID-19 pandemic, we hope that the temporary suspension of provincial standardized testing is one of those fissures. If stakeholders can see that it is possible to not have these exams, then perhaps they will be open to realizing the benefits of permanently foregoing them.

Regardless of our specific tasks in the months and years to come, we wish to continue our broader goal of working against oppressive systems and practices as we strive for a more equitable education system. Listening first and foremost to students and their struggles within the current education system and working with them to co-create sustainable solutions is one of the ways the RAD Educators Network may realize this goal. ●



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