

The Transition from Pre-Covid to Post-Covid Education in BC:

A Philosophical Approach for District 1

In Three Levels of Transition

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While Jean Jacques Rousseau believed that children should be allowed to develop “naturally without constraints imposed on them by society” in order to “reach their fullest potential, both educationally and morally” we have not seen evidence of this over the past few months of remote schooling. Those who have been disconnected from their schools and communities are, in many cases, struggling. More importantly, we have seen an attack on the equity that public school systems are supposed to protect, in that those with means, cultural and economic capital in Bourdieu’s terms, are thriving, and those without, are languishing. As we prepare for three different levels of potential school opening next year - no access, moderate access, and full access to the school buildings - the lessons learned in the spring of 2020 help guide us in our planning. Once we have set our ‘new normal’, hopefully in the fall of 2021, the inequities which became more public and pronounced during this time will have been addressed or are being addressed in ways that they hadn’t in the past.

The economic context of this district provides a challenge for youth attaining an adequate education. The threshold for an adequate education, according to Gutman, is the ability “to participate in the political process.” (Gutman in Curren, 2007, p. 239) The poverty and racial diversity of this district lead one to question what kind of education is adequate for democratic participation in this community, and what steps need to be taken to achieve that “adequate” education. One common thread of the three levels of school structure is that we need to engage parent participation. We are now relying more on parents than ever before in order for them to play the role of teachers in their children’s formal education. We need to be purposeful in order to create a true partnership with parents, in order for them to be involved in the political process. Parent participation is easy to talk about, but will be hard to do and sustain. In some

ways, with more families likely in crisis, they would perhaps seem less able to be actively engaged in their child's learning.

This “democratic threshold” that Gutman references is different in each community, and in this school district it seems that the threshold needs to be raised. “Educational adequacy is tied to the requirements of equal citizenship” (Satz, 2008, p. 424), and “an education system that precludes the children of poorer families from competing in the same market and society as their wealthier peers cannot be adequate.” (p. 434) As Feinberg said, “[R]espect for the child's future autonomy, as an adult, often requires preventing his free choice now.” (Feinberg in Curren, 2007, p. 113) In this community, work needs to happen to help raise the level of expectations and possibilities for its youth to be able to participate in the broader democratic process. It is incumbent upon leaders to design a model and system that supports authentic equity of opportunity while improving learning. To do this well will be critically important, for as Callan warns, “[T]he attempt to understand the reasonableness of convictions that may be in deep conflict with doctrines learned in the family cannot be carried through without inviting the disturbing question that these convictions might be the framework of a better way of life, or at least one that is just as good.” (Callan in Curren, 2007, p. 125)

Another area that requires thought and attention is culturally responsive teaching. Multiculturalism “is meant to be an approach to education and to public culture that acknowledges the diversity of cultures and subcultures and that proposes to deal with that diversity in some other way than by imposing the values and ideals of the hitherto dominant Anglo-Saxon cultural tradition.” (Appiah in Curren, 2007, p. 256) In this district, 41% of the students are Hispanic, yet there are few Hispanic teachers. This makes it very challenging for teachers and students to identify with one another and even more difficult for those children to be seen other

than as subjugated by a dominant group. In addition to the significant percentage of Hispanics, 36% of students are considered to have International identity. So, within a building one might be able to create valuable multicultural opportunities, but when forced to learn remotely, this becomes much more challenging. The typical traditional ways of bringing people together may not be possible or consistent. By not being in a building, other opportunities exist that allow for teachers to better meet the needs of their diverse students in a more culturally responsive way. “Integrated education must respect the cultural and racial identities of students and recognize when cultural differences bear on the task of education.” (Blum in Curren, 2007, p. 268) To do this we need to do more than teach an understanding of cultures; we need to develop authentic “respect for identities.” (Appiah in Curren, 2007, p. 258) To do this we teach children to “reflect critically on their identities, including their ethnic identities” in order to “equip all of us to share the public space with people of multiple identities and distinct subcultures.” (p. 262) This would be akin to what Blum calls “educational ethnoracial pluralism,” which identifies the need for schools to value and recognize “ethnoracial group identity, culture, and distinctness” (Blum in Curren, 2007, p. 269) in order to support student connections. This can be done more effectively through remote learning than it can be in face to face, large group instruction. Teachers can capitalize on the removal of their role at the front of a class, teaching all students the same material in the same oppressive way, in order to support ethnoracially specific learning opportunities while students learn at home. With teaching taking on a more flexible model, with greater student choice, this should also be a benefit.

In the full closure model the role of parents and community are integral for the continuation of learning. We will be relying on them like never before for their skills that in the past were not seen or appreciated. There will be a need for obvious things like their translation skills to translate

material created by teachers as well as we will need their help in accessing community spaces like churches, halls and other physical structures as we need more buildings to allow for physical distancing in the moderate and full access portions of the plans. It is worth noting that the specifics of this district, with its high level of workers who may be declared essential, mean there will be great pressure to limit any full closure periods of time.

Teachers can support their students to examine their identities critically, and then to participate in dialogue and public deliberation designed to develop an appreciation and understanding of others without diminishing their own identity. In planning for what the school structures will look like next, we need to reach out to the community members and give them voice through a structure like a community council as we plan for the three levels of school next year. By collaborating with the community and giving them a voice and a place at the decision-making table we hope to increase community participation of District 1 families throughout the Covid19 crisis and beyond.

A third area that the past few months has exposed is that of poor pedagogy. Many teachers continue to practice a transmission model of education which kills the joy of learning (Freire) while overwhelming the victims and offering little value. What has been demonstrated, by those who have embraced the opportunity to remove the invisible walls of tradition and training, is that flexible, personalized learning is very powerful, and it is powerful for all learners. Therefore, it is important for leaders to design a model and system that increases and supports flexibility and personalization for learning.

Within British Columbia the school system is designed to produce “Educated Citizens” and to do that the curriculum has been designed around a “Know-Understand-Do” model that

emphasizes flexibility and personalized learning. (BC Curriculum Overview, n.d.) Whitehead cautioned educators to reduce the number of things they teach in order to teach well, and cautioned against disconnected learning; as he said: “[E]radicate the fatal disconnection of subjects which kills the vitality of our modern curriculum.” (Whitehead, 1929) The BC Curriculum echoes those cautions. Literacy and numeracy are the foundations of the curriculum in British Columbia and, as we saw when school buildings were closed, they became the focus and centre of student learning plans. However, what the school closures also did was remove many of the artificial structures that existed, allowing teachers increased opportunities to define how they taught literacy and numeracy, but more significantly, it gave them the freedom to define the other parts of student learning, and many of the successful teacher practices reflected the ideals of John Dewey.

Another factor at play in considering District 1, and the movement between the different levels of transition after the Covid19 crisis, is the consideration of students with special needs. The care of the most vulnerable is always considered an essential service, but in a time when social distancing and quarantine rules are in effect, there is even more required in terms of health and safety, and providing for students for whom home does not necessarily provide as much stability as school does at times. In a district with a lower socio-economic level, and families who may be working in front-line jobs, and perhaps struggling with English as a second language as well, students with special needs designations need schools and teachers to continue to meet policy guidelines around the six core guiding principles that constitute a “free and appropriate public education, or FAPE” (McCall, 2018, p. 7). If the philosophy of educative experiences for all students, as well as the equity in education discussed above, is deemed important by the district, then the practical measures taken during the leveled phases of provision for students with special needs are an outworking of that guiding purpose. A brief look at these practical measures details

how the philosophy of support for all students is reflected through the principles of not just curriculum (literacy and numeracy), but through experiential learning.

First, for all three levels of transition, the Zero Reject principle still applies: no one with a disability or designation is excluded from school services. There are of course necessary changes in how services are provided during the transition time, and even in what services will look like in the ‘new normal’ when the third stage is over, but the basic fact of universal school access remains unchanged.

Next, during all three levels of transition – the period of no access to school buildings, the period of moderate access, and the final stage, when schools can be open for students and teachers again – there will also still be a commitment to the other guiding principles for special education. In looking ahead, three of these principles stand out: 1) individualized and appropriate education (IAE); 2) least restrictive environment (LRE); and 3) parent participation. These principles are enshrined in law in the United States through IDEA, the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (n.d.). In Canada, they undergird the policies and practices of special education as well.

In many ways, the provision of IAE during the ‘Level 1’ phase of the Covid19 crisis allows the education system to broaden an individualized and appropriate education in District 1 – kids who need adaptive technology may not have had enough to go around within the school building, due to budget constraints, but because of the Covid19crisis, practical supports are more available. Wifi hotspots are being provided in neighbourhoods, and as many laptops fitted with adaptive technology as possible are being dropped off to students (due to emergency special education funding, and a repurposing of funding usually prioritized differently in school buildings).

For many students the home will be the least restrictive environment (LRE) during lockdown, and online learning from home will not just be necessary, but will allow students to learn well. Kids who need adaptive technology can use it at home without feeling singled out, and without disturbing those around them; they can be working on adapted curriculum without needing a pull-out model; and may feel less restricted than they do in a school/classroom setting. And in District 1, with its higher percentage of families who don't speak English in the home, and working class families who may not feel as comfortable with technology and with interactions with teachers and schools, the lockdown phase will require patience and connection on the part of the school, to make sure that any technologies provided come with training and support, so parents are more fully encouraged to participate in their children's education than they might have been before. ELL teachers can be given personal protective equipment for initial home visits, and time for one-to-one online visits, hopefully in the home language or with translation as needed. If the philosophy of educative experiences for all students is deemed important by the district, then the practical measures taken during a Level 1 phase of provision for students with special needs is an outworking of that guiding purpose.

During the Level 2 phase of Covid19 response, with moderate access to schools and teachers, a blended learning model more truly applies – as some classroom space is opened up, a very individualized analysis of each special education student in District 1 will need to take place, to see which students would benefit more from staying home – safety and health concerns addressed first, of course – and who would benefit from going to school. If the most appropriate supports would be best provided by more one-to-one time online, with family and community support, then funding would ideally be used at this stage to hire more EAs/support workers – some for in-class support for the kids who come back within social distancing guidelines, and some for

continued online or even at-home support. As the lockdown is gradually lifted, teachers and support workers will continue to provide services in the best and least restrictive environment for students, depending on age, disability or designation, and family situation. At this time, partnerships with parents of special education students has hopefully become much more fluent in District 1 in this phase, as parents have realized that they can be very involved in their children's education and support. At the moderate access stage, hopefully parents will have a great deal of input into which students would benefit from going to the school building, what the family needs for support are, and will gain greater confidence in voicing what they want to see going forward.

At the Level 3, or full-access phase of transition, if District 1 is fully back to school-based learning from a health and safety point of view, there is still room for discussion about which students with special needs would benefit from going back to the building. Taking into account considerations of both IAE and LRE, issues that create challenges in the school building - such as higher-than-average anxiety, behaviour outbursts, giftedness that requires learning at a higher grade level, etc. – could all mean that some students should continue to learn from home, because it best meets their needs at this point, and for as long as necessary.

Moving forward, the blended or hybrid model of learning – some students learning online, from home, and some learning in a school building – is the preferred model to provide the least restrictive environment and the most meaningful parent and community participation while supporting special education students. Even with full access available, teachers and support workers would ideally continue to provide services in the best educative environment possible. A parent/community/school partnership has hopefully been solidified in District 1 by this stage, and culturally responsive plans put in place for students that rely directly on parent participation and feedback. As students would benefit from changes to their individual plans over the next year in

various forms of blended learning, hopefully there would be continued openness and flexibility in what would work best for students, and parents would feel increasingly welcome in the school building to support their own kids and others. It is also important to remember that the guiding principles and motives for students with special needs also apply to the general school population. As individualized, flexible and blended learning becomes more practical and widely adopted and adapted in each school, the belief that each student's experience of learning leads directly to their own development can be guided by what is already in place for students with special needs.

In this environment we need to find ways to make sure that teachers get to know their students in a much more meaningful way than before. What we have seen over the past months is that structures and practices can be put into place relatively quickly. These structures deepen a teacher's understanding of their students; the implications of this new knowledge are profound. It is a case of going slow to go fast. The focus must, even looking beyond the coming year, be on building relationships.

In the absence of access or only partial access to school the role of a culturally responsive curriculum will be integral to whether or not learning occurs at home. Instead of replicating all subjects in their isolated silos and expecting parents to teach all subjects an integrated approach to the subjects will make connections between subjects more harmonious. Less separation between subjects will also make it easier for parents who will be tasked with a role in teaching their children in the online learning environment. It will be crucial that changes that are made are made with the plan for the long-term, so the system does not just snap back once we have a vaccine, or otherwise can return to pre-Covid19 conditions.

In order to be successful, learners need to develop self-control guided by purpose. There are plenty of accidental and intentional circumstances to distract and to dissuade from the pursuit of our goals, but we need to develop the skills, understanding, and attitudes to resist impulses and desires that move us from our aims. Dewey believed that the way to do this is to be guided by purpose. The crucial educational problem for teachers is helping their students find the urges that lead to purpose, and to do this, they need to know their students; teachers need to be intelligently aware of the capacities, needs, and past experiences of their students. In a district characterized by high poverty, high immigration, and a high percentage of non-English speaking people, this kind of knowledge can be very difficult to attain. It is this kind of knowledge that will also allow teachers to identify educative experiences for their students. In all three structures of school access the role of their parents increased. This is a silver lining of the Covid19 crisis on education. Through technology teachers need to communicate with students and parents in a careful and planned way to provide purpose.

Through the removal of the authority of the teacher through a progressive education, even more guidance and control by the teacher occurs. In fact, as Dewey remarks, a progressive education based on experience requires even more teacher guidance than traditional school. In the no access and moderate access stages, the teacher needs to be involved in the creation of experiences more than ever before. Educative experiences, says Dewey, need to draw from what has already been learned and then used to modify, in some way, that which comes after. In addition to this, the development along this line must fuel continuing growth in universal ways, not just for specific applications. That is, as we look at supporting student learning from a distance, we need to be very mindful to build from where the students are and help them grow the pertinent skills and understandings for continuous learning, focusing on those skills and understandings that can

be adapted for different contexts and purposes. To do this, we must have a very real understanding of who our students are and what they need to develop in order to be successful learners. Dewey believed that the artificial, regimental approach to traditional education prevented teachers from knowing their students; therefore, how could they possibly provide learning experiences that were valuable to their students? With that in mind, we should maximize any opportunities we have to deepen teacher understanding of their students. In all three possible structures of the school access there still is an opportunity for school staff to make home visits to certain families. This has a very strong positive effect on families as it shows that school staff have not forgotten about them and still care.

In building from where students are, teachers increasingly are finding sound educational experiences that are meaningful to their students. Because they do not have twenty five students in one class at one time, they are more inclined to work with their students to create and to take advantage of learning opportunities. On the other side, we are seeing students more willing to use assistive technology as they are using it in the safety of their own homes. Teachers and students are increasing their knowledge of tools and their utility to improve learning. Teachers have become visible learners with their students which is forcing them to build expectations and experiences in collaborative ways. In doing this, all parties must be aware of the context. Desires, purposes, and capacities all need to be considered by the teachers, students, and parents as the learning experiences are generated. This seems to fit the type of socially constructed democracy Dewey imagined education to be. Skilled teachers are taking those situations and leveraging them for meaningful interaction and continuity of learning with the students and parents creating and controlling the contexts.

The aim of this proposal is to find ways to safely and responsibly provide improved education for the youth of our school district. In all three scenarios we intend to apply the core attributes reflected above. The system and actions need to address challenges to equity of opportunity and learning. The learning environment and material needs to be flexible and must be culturally responsive, creating and supporting opportunities for people of all cultural backgrounds to participate meaningfully and equally. And the learning will be personalized for each learner and their needs. As Dewey said, the “ideal aim of education is creation of power of self-control” (Dewey, 1938, p. 64) and that is our purpose.

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