

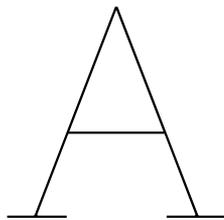


# Leaving normal

## Re-imagining schools post-COVID and beyond

Vidya Shah and Erika Shaker

“People need to get back to a normal life.”  
— *Simon Descoteaux, principal of  
Ecole de la Primerose, Quebec City*



As provinces take tentative — some less tentative than others — steps towards reopening, what it looks like for public education and what it means for education workers, students and families has been a matter of fierce debate.

Much of the conversation has focused on the physical safety aspects of reopening: what it means for distancing, how it puts discussions of class size and funding relative to school capacity in a radically different context. The new post-COVID reality will require much more rigorous sanitation, many more custodial staff, and a completely different understanding of basic worker rights including paid sick days, paid leave, and the right to refuse unsafe work in order to protect workers and students and their families from the pandemic. It will also necessitate a much more flexible approach to education to accommodate sudden and prolonged absences, and because some children who are immunocompromised, or whose families are, may simply not be able to return to school without a vaccine.

But this is only one aspect of reopening. It doesn't begin to address the support mechanisms that need to be in place to address the

emotional and mental health of students, staff and families, who may have been traumatized by the previous months of lockdown, illness, isolation. Some may have lost friends or family to the pandemic, and still be grieving. Some may have not begun to grieve. Some may have developed anxiety or agoraphobia or other mental illnesses. Some may be struggling with addiction. Some children may have spent the past months in a home where they do not feel safe.

And beyond this, there are other deeper and far reaching discussions that must take place in the context of reopening — rooted in the recognition that “back to normal” is untenable for far too many students who were not only under-served but damaged by the status quo. Months of isolation, of crisis learning, of just-in-time WiFi and homemade daily timetables (abandoned in week four), of resentment and frustration and, in some cases, giving up on the pretense of homeschooling altogether, have thrust into the spotlight the question of what post-COVID classrooms will look like. One thing is certain: when it comes to schools as places of work, places of care, and places of learning — because they are simultaneously all three — **“normal” is not a standard to which we should aspire.**

These past few months of physical isolation and separation have surfaced what some families and communities in Canada have known all along — that schooling was

intentionally constructed to sort students based on perceived abilities (Gaymes San Vicente, 2016; Parekh & Brown, 2019) and that they continue to maintain grave inequities for historically oppressed populations.

As populations with greater power, privilege and social capital have experienced challenges with access, opportunity and freedom in these times, we see greater alignment between their calls for change and what many Indigenous, Black and racialized communities have been advocating for all along: an approach to schooling that centers honours the humanity in students, educators, families and communities (Battiste, 2013; Love, 2019). In this time of intense change, we write this article as an invitation to pause, reset and reimagine possibilities for schooling as sites transformation that honour our collective humanity.

We are at a moment of reckoning for our public institutions and our institutions of care which are so often at the centre of our communities. If we are to ensure progress, we need to take a multi-faceted and layered approach that is interconnected rather than linear as we move towards reemergence (not simply “reopening”). There is how we have to respond to these current times in the context of workplace standards and proximity. There is also what we have learned, or not learned, in creating and ensuring communities of care and places of learning, and what we do with that knowledge. This leads us to ask the question: How can this time invite a reimagining of schooling?

In spite of the grand promise of public education rooted in its potential to engage and empower on a universal basis, traditionally, schools have been sites of fragmentation and separation. We ask students to separate their heads, hearts and spirits by focusing at times exclusively on their mental development and failing to see them as complex and nuanced people. We separate students from one another based on exclusionary and antiquated notions of ability, by comparing them to one another on the basis of grades and their ability to be socialized into white supremacist, capitalist schooling (Kelly, 2020), and as concealed attempts at creating a two-tier schooling system within public education through offering specialty programs, gifted programming and French immersion classes. We separate students from their families, communities and larger society when our teaching is instrumental and technical, and disconnected from larger social realities and students’ lived experiences.

Then there are the students who we deem uneducable, who we have given up on, whose humanity we fail to see.

This erosion of humanity also occurs in the continuous deprofessionalization and surveillance of educators, leading them away from their inner knowing and being in classrooms as competent professionals. It occurs in the ways that employees and representatives of, and ambassadors for, the system are themselves socialized into white supremacist, capitalist spaces in which they learn to be silent and even complicit in the ongoing harm of students and adherence to the status quo, with clear and direct repercussions should they step out of line, especially if they too are historically oppressed. Dehumanization is also present in the often-traumatic ways that families, particularly those from historically oppressed populations, are spoken to, dismissed, disregarded, pushed out, and denied information.

How, in this time of pause, might we acknowledge and grieve how these systems have dehumanized particular members of our school communities in different ways for far too long? How might we imagine a schooling system that honours the humanity of students, educators, families and communities? We attempt to answer these questions by exploring concepts of equity, relationality and well-being, and critically engaged learning.

### **Equity**

As we consider a return to school, we need to acknowledge pre-existing inequities that have been exacerbated for students, families and educators as well as new inequities that may have arisen. Differences in access and opportunity to health, wellness and opportunities to learn appear for:

- Families experiencing housing and food insecurity or living in poverty
- Indigenous communities living on reserve with boil water advisories and inadequate health systems
- Families with members that are immunocompromised
- Families living in shelters
- Families with loved ones who are incarcerated
- Families that are non-status without access to universal health care
- Families that have experienced increases in child, sexual and domestic abuse

- Families that have experienced deaths both COVID-19 related and not
- Families experiencing mental health challenges
- Families with members who have disabilities

Humanizing the return to school means recognizing and responding to these different realities. Charles Taylor’s seminal essay on ‘The Politics of Recognition’ (1994) states that nonrecognition and misrecognition can inflict harm and therefore constitute forms of oppression. If we do not see difference, and we are not conscious of how we may pathologize or denigrate those differences, we further inequity through an assimilationist ideology that educates children away from their families, communities and identities.

As we return to school, we need to be conscious of the ways in which crisis breeds opportunity (and opportunity for whom). Sometimes, that opportunity is aligned with the collective good, with social and political justice and with communities. Sometimes, that opportunity is aligned with white supremacist, capitalist aims to further self-interest and personal gain, which we saw with a vengeance as schools in New Orleans were privatized after Hurricane Katrina. Humanizing education demands vigilance in recognizing and disrupting disaster capitalism (Saltman, 2009) and disaster white supremacy (Lopez, 2020) in education.

In particular, we need to be vigilant about aims to de-professionalize teaching, moves to e-learning as a replacement for the co-generative and relational nature of teaching that funnels public dollars in private hands, opportunities for “school choice” that result in furthering a two-tiered education system, and contracting out of curriculum development and educational content to the private sector in the name of “efficiency” and “cost containment”.

#### **Relationality and well-being**

For many, months of physical isolation, concern about our present and future, and an increased sense of emotional disconnection has led to increased trauma and mental health challenges. For others, this trauma exists because of and in addition to trauma caused by settler colonial, white supremacist, capitalist, ableist, cisheteronormative, sexist, xenophobic systems of oppression, which have resulted in

disproportional access to basic rights, inadequate social structures, ongoing experiences of exclusion and violence, and more. Vocalized concerns about student and family access to technology in the leadup to and during the move towards online (crisis) learning hinted at the need for a far-reaching and much more systemic discussion about equity and oppression; one that needed to go far beyond access to Chromebooks and reliable WiFi.

As we return to schools, we will need to attend to the mental health and wellness of students and educators experiencing trauma at individual and collective levels. While for some this trauma is rooted in months of isolation, disconnection, and even the realization that for some students home is not a safe space, we must also reckon with knowing that, for some students, and staff, a *return* to class is what constitutes trauma for those most oppressed by schooling. In the process, we must question our assumptions of who has experienced trauma, assumptions that often rooted in racist and classist discourses. How can we relate to ourselves, each other and our environment in ways that acknowledge the trauma, and also acknowledge the joy, the resistance, the desires, the possibilities and the hope?

During lockdown, the role played by the physical school became more evident in its absence, when questions were raised about the implications of students no longer having access to school breakfast or lunch, or engagement through planned activities that may not be available outside of school hours or off school grounds. How might students respond to a physical return to schools in which there are far fewer students in their classrooms, there is continued physical distancing (with implications for how sensory needs can be met), and there new rules about how they can interact with teachers and friends? In reopening, how might our classrooms become sites of what Alexis Shotwell (2020) refers to as community care? How might we create the conditions for students to demonstrate their capacities to care for themselves, each other and the larger school environment? How might their actions and their thinking consider those who are immunocompromised or have family members that are immunocompromised, for whom reemergence from lockdown is simply not an option until a vaccine is available? How might this shift create new and necessary relationships between families, school and communities? And even more broadly, how might communities of care

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change our relationships and responsibilities to protecting our lands and waters?

This pause allows us the opportunity to let go of the apolitical, ahistorical and neoliberal approaches to schooling that have given preference to individuality, effectiveness and competition and re-center values of relationality, connection and community.

### **Critically engaged learning**

Schooling involves formalized measures of learning, such as evaluations and standardized testing and is a site of social stratification often along the lines of race, social class, gender and other social identities. As we return to schools, can we question which elements of formal schooling we might relax, or even leave behind altogether? How might we nurture and encourage curiosity and wonder — that need not be measured and accounted for at every stage — deep relations and individual and collective transformation?

Learning, whether in our homes, on the streets or in our classrooms is co-generative and co-constitutive. How might we imagine a learning environment that is also critically conscious in its ability to challenge the status quo, to center and analyze multiple perspectives, to make relevant connections to larger socio-political and historical contexts, and to take action towards social justice (Lewinson, Leland & Harste, 2014)?

This type of deep engagement with learning requires critical self-reflection about who we are in relation to each other and the world. It requires that we challenge notions of students as empty vessels and educators as the “depositors of knowledge”, notions that are ever-present in the Ontario government’s push for e-learning pre, during and possibly post-physical distancing in the time of COVID-19. While a fear-based approach will focus attention on gap-filling the “fundamentals” of language and mathematics, it is the arts (in all its forms), physical education, social studies and science that will provide the container for learning and wellness. This type of engagement also invites us to imagine future possibilities with students, to honour their creativity, imagination and solutions towards co-creating that is more just, humane and compassionate.

Such an approach to education means that we need to center much of what has been sidelined all along in education — the power

of young people, the power of families and communities, and the power of educators.

### **Re-emergence**

The focus post-COVID19, as economies and institutions begin to reopen, has largely been on “recovery,” and a resumption of “normal” (with some acknowledgement that this is a “new normal”).

But, as far too many students, educators and communities know, and as many more of us were witness to over the shutdown, normal hasn’t always been inadequate; in some cases it’s been outright damaging.

COVID-19 has provided a moment of reckoning; a possibility of reimagining education based on the role it plays in our communities and lives, and the role it *could* play; on what we know about education and what we now know we *don’t* know; on what we’ve learned about engaged and connected schooling and what we *need* to learn.

The inadequacy — and the trauma and violence — of ‘normal’ makes a mere ‘recovery’ untenable. The only possibility for social progress, for justice, for truly engaged, anti-oppressive and connected education that honours students, families, educators and communities is re-emergence. Anything less is to turn our backs on the promise of public education, and those communities and voices who have been excluded from it. ●

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