Our Schools/Our Selves

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Canadian Centre For Policy Alternatives

Winter/Spring 2021

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Editorial

Build back kinder

Erika Shaker

Over the summer, and with September approaching, calls grew louder for clearly articulated back-to-school plans that addressed infection rates, proximity, classrooms that needed to look radically different to ensure safety of staff and students and their families, adequate support for the communities and students most impacted, remote learning, infrastructure needs, public health guidelines and pedagogical considerations. And the resources required to do all of this well and safely.

With very few exceptions, the response from provincial governments was underwhelming. And in this context of inadequate or uncertain funding, parental and staff concerns, public health communiques and questionably-focused provincial leadership, school boards struggled to put together strategies only to have to rewrite them days later (I'm trying to remember if there were four or five iterations of my board's back to school plans).

Both my kids chose to return to in-person learning — my eldest on an every-other-day, alternating week quadmester system, my youngest back full time — and it seems to be going…..fine? Of course, classes look wildly different, recess is certainly much more functional than fun, and significantly more time is spent fighting with Google Classroom. But so far no one has gotten sick, the kids walk to school so they can avoid crowded buses, we've only received one notice about a possible case in each school, and we're still talking to each other.

I also find I'm hearing more from my eldest child about what she's learning, perhaps as a result of the increased amount of time she's around the house (or maybe it's just easier to ask her parents than to ask Google). My youngest seems to have adapted to a new teacher, new program, and new principal (the previous one left just before school started to become principal of a new online school). Remote learning has become more routine, but it still feels challenging, and comes with its own level of stress for students. And I can't even imagine what it must be like for staff who may be simultaneously overseeing students learning in class and remotely.

But what I have been most struck by is how thoroughly the constant pressure of living during a pandemic has changed everything, and how we find ourselves preparing for this by building in extra time for daily tasks, and taking more planned pauses throughout the day to process the impacts. My youngest gets up an hour earlier to build in extra time for possible disruptions to his routine — which can derail our mornings — so he can still get to school before the bell. My eldest needs more time after school to decompress. We have lots of conversations about the need to acknowledge the stress that educators are under. Or their friends. Or their friends' families.

Or their own parents.

These days, a layer of tension lurks just below the surface as we push through the day,

still talking to each other, still completing our tasks, still making sure homework gets done, still checking in with aging parents, still trying to find time to do whatever it takes to keep physically active before going back to our computer screen.

And all while communicating with coworkers who are going through their own version of similar things — except maybe with daycare and their own individual challenges thrown into the mix.

There are no more spontaneous brainstorming discussions. Every conversation is a video meeting. We hop back and forth between multiple channels of simultaneous communication (the Zoom call, the chat, the Slack updates, and the text messages for the parallel meeting), while wondering why we feel so disconnected or where the day went. Work hours bleed into home time before we realize it.

Then we hear that “some” employers are suspicious that employees are practising “time theft.” And we wonder, furiously, as meetings go well past 5:00 pm to accommodate colleagues in different time zones, how it’s possible for anyone to come to this conclusion.

And my family has it relatively easy. My partner and I have steady employment and can work from home. Our kids are (touch wood) healthy and have avoided COVID-19, as have our parents. We can help with homework and navigate student/teacher meetings and provide extra support, or adjust when kids get sent home from school with a stress-related stomach ache (ahem) that becomes a public health mandated 48-hour sick leave.

Unlike racialized or vulnerable communities, or workers who are deemed essential except when it comes to their right to good health and safety, we can shelter down. We have that privilege — which *should not be* a privilege. We can, to a significant extent, reduce or compensate for the ways in which this period has impacted our kids from a social and pedagogical perspective. None of this is a given for far too many families who struggle to support each other and their children’s at-school or online learning in addition to navigating the deeply inequitable economy, changing labour market, and the economic impacts of this disruption. These are the deep and systemic inequities the pandemic continues to reveal, and that too many governments sweep aside with comments about families “making choices.”

But, as a society, we haven’t yet come close to reckoning with the impact this new (sur)reality has had on our collective mental health, and the long-term effects on friendships and familial relationships; the generalized anxiety a quick trip to the grocery store can elicit; the obvious discomfort my youngest displays when he sees people not physical distancing on a TV show; the knowledge that this may look very different again after the holidays if (when?) infection rates spike; the constant need to try and anticipate the unpredictable; the ease with which exchanges — on social media or in general — ramp up into something much more volatile.

Layered on top of the systemic inequity that existed long before the pandemic, the intensifying public mental health crisis needs to be acknowledged, addressed, and prioritized. Rather than focusing exclusively on “building back better,” we need to talk, now, about the overwhelming need to build back *kinder* and more compassionate. This is an integral part of a healthy recovery for families, workplaces and communities. And there is no time to waste.

Addressing trauma in the post-COVID-19 classroom

A TIP

Ryan Monte

What is prompted when you hear the phrase "think of the children"? Perhaps it evokes the thought of a child you know, or even the community of all the world's children.

Guided by the Seventh Generation Principle, Haudenosaunee Chiefs make decisions having considered the sustainability seven generations onward. While this principle is associated with care for the land of water, it also applies to relationships, and has guided Haudenosaunee Peoples as stewards of Turtle Island.

It seems intuitive that of course we should be thinking of our children, and that surely we do it all the time, but especially in education. Yet, if we step back and look at (and from) this moment of crisis, it would seem we are hardly considering them at all. From my perspective as a young educator, it is hard to say we are being sufficiently thoughtful of our children today, and certainly not of those seven generations from now. The truth is that humanity will move past this pandemic in time, but *how* we progress is much less prescribed and is absolutely negotiable.

At the core of this issue is how we are addressing the magnitude of trauma. By now it should be apparent that a pandemic is equivalent to a natural disaster, war, or famine. In such times two things are true. First: it is insensitive and sometimes impossible to expect people to fulfil their ordinary roles in the same manner. Second: children have an immense ability to appear to cope, often without the tools to express or process their concerns.

The protracted nature of COVID-19 has led to a dulled sense of urgency. It has reinforced the notion that we should to try to return to "normal"....when there is nothing normal about now at all. We are insisting children apply themselves to a familiar daily structure — including schooling — while inadequately acknowledging or addressing the trauma they still live with.

To be clear, I firmly believe that children, when able, should be in schools. However, I am concerned that there is a significant disconnect between what we expect of schools and the greater purpose of education — especially now, in this moment.

To appreciate just how significant this pandemic is for children, and how schooling must adapt to address their physical, mental, and spiritual wellness will require taking a step in a new direction. How we go about integrating wellness in our classrooms also presents an avenue to reform education; one that reflects a leading dimension of pedagogy.

Trauma informed practice

Trauma informed practice (TIP) is an umbrella term for a series of goals rooted in equity, safety, and therapy. A TIP seeks to gain a full understanding of an individual, by recognising their journey and all that is relevant to feeling understood. It seeks to reduce harm (or reharm) to an individual on all occasions. And it seeks to give an individual tools to process, cope with, and overcome their trauma.

To consider this pandemic through the lens of a trauma informed practice means taking stock of all that has changed in the lives of students. Think about the fear of the known and unknown, the worry students have for their own health and wellness and that of those they love, and the volumes of new information children now must process; the disruption to routine and the utter absence of variance in predictability. Think about the loved ones they might have lost, perhaps without even the opportunity to say goodbye. Think about the emotional labour as relationships are strained under economic and social challenges; the milestones missed, like birthdays and graduations that are fundamental to childhood development. Think about a toddler who's had to relearn to maintain their distance, kids who can no longer hug their friends, and all of us becoming used to new rules about how to interact in social spaces.

Not every child will recognize these new realities as trauma, or experience these feelings equally, but a TIP means creating the space to listen. So, the principle pillar is to open lines of communication. Doing so means students and

teachers learn how to share their feelings in the classroom.

A good first step is to establish a framework for sharing so that everyone feels protected and welcomed, choosing at times to share in a large group and other times in small groups or with partners. Techniques to facilitate this can include only speaking with “I” statements, validating the experience of others, and only speaking one at a time. Having set up a framework for talking, teachers should feel supported to spend as much time as necessary in this space; if students require an entire day of this kind of instruction and communication without getting to curriculum, it is probably with good reason.

The next pillar of a TIP means using the information learned to protect and dignify students. You may become aware in a sharing circle that your student has lost a family member from the virus. What you may eventually learn is that this family member was their main source of support and the one that drove them to school. Knowing this, you can now be particularly sensitive if your student arrives late. You will understand the numerous dimensions at play. Perhaps you will go out of your way to simply let them know you are glad they came. This pandemic continues to create many emotional pitfalls in our lives, but a TIP means you will be building bridges and avoiding — or at least minimizing — perils.

The third pillar of a TIP is the implementation of methods that promote physical, mental, and spiritual wellness, all of which can fall under the concept of mindfulness; an attention for one’s self, in open presence. They are the ways educators and caregivers help students alleviate, express, understand, grow, focus, release, and accept. Pretty well anything that contributes to wellness and healing can fall within this section of the practice, which means that each student may have their own preferences. Ask your students to share their ideas, and honour them as much as possible, recognizing that some activities may have to be adapted to observe the physical distancing now required. A student may take walks with their family, so you may go walking as a class. Another student may cook food, so you could prepare a meal together in the classroom.

TIP also recognises the trauma that educators and education workers are experiencing. Day to day, students and staff transact social-emotional behaviour. Together, we replicate society at large and form strong community bonds.

In my experience I have found that children love meditation, but others may wish to incorporate elements of art therapy; anything to give students a platform to reflect on their feelings and express themselves in a non-verbal way. Physical catharsis is an excellent way to express energy, frustration, and desire for control. Spending an hour making TikToks can be a productive use of time if your students are lacking momentum. Make more occasions for your students to sweat out feelings they are not aware they are embodying. In a controlled setting, let them holler at the top of their lungs. And remember nap time? Well, it is right in line with a TIP.

TIP also recognises the trauma that educators and education workers are experiencing. Day to day, students and staff transact social-emotional behaviour. Together, we replicate society at large and form strong community bonds. By addressing the concerns of both staff and students, a TIP broadens the focus of schooling to include learning (including from each other) and healing. We know that the strength of and support for our communities is a key factor in overcoming the difficulty of this pandemic. It would be incredible if our classrooms became the template a society more considerate of each others’ needs, more compassionate for what we cannot see, and more deliberate in sharing our emotions.

If we could offer something to our children seven generations onward, what might it be? To answer that means revisiting the purpose of education: for the support, betterment and empowerment of youth. Now is the occasion for the Ministries of Education, school boards, and administrators to strengthen the connection with parents and guardians, and extend to educators and education workers a freedom to emphasise wellness — for students, for staff, and for families.

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Racializing merit

The revocation of Regulation 274/12 and teacher hiring in Ontario

Zuhra Abawi

While some have welcomed the scrapping of Regulation 274/12, announced by Minister of Education Stephen Lecce on October 15th, there is limited discussion about what new hiring mandates will entail, and minimal information available as to how the revocation will increase representation for BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, People of Colour) teachers who are grossly underrepresented in permanent teaching positions.

Regulation 274/12

Regulation 274/12 was enacted in 2012 under the Ontario Education Act, specifically to ensure transparent, fair and consistent hiring practices for both permanent and long-term teaching positions (ETFO, 2012). It required that all publicly-funded school boards create and maintain two lists, one for Occasional Teachers (OTs) and one for Long Term Occasional Teachers (LTOs). Occasional Teachers were able to apply to the LTO list once they had completed a year on their respective board's OT roster.

The purpose of the lists was to assign seniority numbers to candidates to comply with hiring mandates. Therefore, when hiring for permanent teaching positions, candidates from the LTO list with the top five seniority numbers and the required qualifications would receive an interview.

The common assumption is that the person with the highest seniority will automatically receive the job offer, but candidates must meet *all* requirements and *also* have the experience or seniority to be considered qualified for an interview. Should none of the top five senior candidates be selected, school administrators are able to continue down the seniority list until a candidate is hired.

Although the Regulation is far from perfect, it provided many teachers with a framework for accessing permanent employment and offered many the opportunity to access an interview and showcase their skills, experience and qualifications. The removal of Regulation 274/12 without critical anti-racist transformative policy, practice and oversight will likely exacerbate the underrepresentation of permanent racialized teachers in the province as administrators are allocated sweeping autonomy to make hiring decisions.

Teacher hiring and underrepresentation

Based on census data and extant studies, although Ontario is often touted for its diversity, permanent teaching and administrative staff remain overwhelmingly White (Abawi & Eizadirad, 2020; Abawi, 2018; Turner, 2015; Ryan et al., 2009). This speaks to larger social and economic trends in Ontario, such as the overrepresentation of BIPOC people in precarious non-permanent employment relationships and poverty (Block & Galabuzi, 2011; Lewchuk, et al, 2013; United Way, 2019).

Despite an onslaught of equity, inclusive and diversity educational policies, hiring initiatives have centred on bias-free, objective hiring policies as best practice for increasing teacher diversity. This has perpetuated the status quo of Whiteness in the teaching profession as the power relations, which inform and encompass hiring practices, have remained unacknowledged. Racialized teachers who do not receive their training in Canada, also known as Internationally Educated Teachers (IETs) face further barriers in credential recognition (Pollock, 2010).

Access to teacher education programs continues to be racially stratified: while teacher education programs provide the option for applicants to 'self-identify', the admissions demographic data is not released, making it difficult to gage if faculties of education are complying with their stated diversity objectives (Abawi & Eizadirad; Abawi, 2018; Childs et al., 2010).

For my own research into the "teacher diversity gap" (Turner 2015), I interviewed 10 teachers of various backgrounds and teaching assignments, employed in publicly-funded schools in Ontario to understand the experiences of teachers of different racial backgrounds in accessing permanent teaching employment. The findings suggest that BIPOC teachers have markedly different experiences in navigating teacher recruitment and hiring processes. For example, several BIPOC teachers were asked to produce identification before entering the building, had their credentials questioned, and were asked about their ability to communicate in English. These were experiences that White participants had not encountered. These microaggressions speak to oppressive practices that serve to marginalize BIPOC students, families, teachers and communities.

While most participants agreed that Regulation 274/12 contained flaws and loopholes for favouritism and nepotism to continue, many believed it provided some consistency and accountability for securing permanent work.

Whose merit?

The educational diversity gap peaks at the administrative level: only 2% of principals and 5% of vice principals identify as racialized (Turner, 2015). It has been widely noted that individuals charged with hiring often hire those that resemble their own social locations (Rivera, 2012).

The revocation of Regulation 274/12 will only provide more agency to majority White school administrators to make hiring decisions whilst omitting any checks and balances. This in turn will make the hiring process and pathway to permanent teaching employment more ambiguous and challenging to navigate, as school administrators are given more autonomy to determine their own notions of merit and 'the best fit' for their schools.

Paving the way forward

Although Regulation 274/12 is in need of significant revisions to ensure transparency and authentic equity, its removal will remove any democratic practice of hiring and allow educational administrators the authority to choose subjective criteria concerning the best-qualified candidate and merit.

To recruit more BIPOC teachers in Ontario, I suggest:

• The implementation of mandatory data collection for publicly-funded boards, in order to determine if boards are adhering to their commitments of diversifying the teacher workforce;

• Embedding an anti-racism approach to the Principal's Qualification Program;

• Re-framing equity, diversity and inclusion from an anti-racist perspective rather than from a Eurocentric, multicultural approach and one which is in consultation with grassroots organizations (families, students and community activists);

• Mandating that Ontario school administrators undertake critical self-reflective practice work to unpack how their positionality (White privilege and identity) impact hiring decisions.

Several BIPOC teachers were asked to produce identification before entering the building, had their credentials questioned, and were asked about their ability to communicate in English. These were experiences that White participants had not encountered.

Further, neoliberal constructs of equity, diversity and inclusion pay lip service to diversity hiring initiatives, while failing to acknowledge and name endemic racism and White privilege that prevent access and silence ongoing and historical inequities of BIPOC communities. So long as diversity, equity and inclusion policy initiatives operate through the guise of neutral, objective and merit-based hiring, BIPOC teachers will continue to be underrepresented in permanent teaching and leadership roles. Therefore, the relationship between overly White administrators in relation to applicants must be unpacked to engage in self-reflective practice on the ongoing barriers and biases encountered by BIPOC educators seeking permanent teaching employment. Without this essential dialogue, the teacher diversity gap will be reinforced through the guise of “best fit” neoliberal meritocracy, while simultaneously omitting any candid discussion on race and power relations (Bonilla-Silva, 2006). While Regulation 274/12 at least provided BIPOC teachers with the chance to have an interview, gain interview experience and network with educational administrators, its revocation will likely leave many languishing in precarious and unstable labour.

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Grassroots organizing & Alberta's school pandemic response

Medeana Moussa and Wing Li

Setting the stage

Alberta's pandemic response fell in line (more or less) with other provinces' lockdown measures to limit cases and spread, at least in the beginning; school closures were ordered March 15, 2020, 10 days after the first presumptive case of COVID-19 was diagnosed in the province.

However, Alberta's governing United Conservative Party had been implementing austerity measures since assuming power in April 2019. Even prior to the pandemic, the government's negotiations with doctors had already completely broken down: on February 21, 2020, the Health Minister had unilaterally ended the Master Agreement with the Alberta Medical Association, the representative body of physicians[1]. At the onset of pandemic-related distance learning, the government cut $128 million from education, laying off 20,000 education workers,[2] and has continued to pull from healthcare and education budgets during this global health crisis.

Early in the pandemic, the Alberta government promised to consult "education stakeholders" — teachers and parents — on back-to-school plans, but at best this process was incomplete. And on July 21, Education Minister LaGrange officially announced that Alberta would return to in-person classes under Scenario 1[3], which effectively meant school would return to near-normal conditions.

The plan did not address already crowded schools, did not minimize disruptions to learning and failed to mitigate impact on families as a result of COVID-19 in schools. Without adequate supplementary funding, safety measures would be downloaded to school authorities (who had already experienced provincial budget cuts, and many had drained their reserves).

Coalition for a safer school relaunch

To address the government's lack of meaningful consultation with health advisers, educators and parents, three grassroots organizations — Support Our Students Alberta, RAD Educators and Alberta Docs4Patients — joined forces to advocate for a safer and more equitable return to school with this central demand: "Now is the time to invest in standards and protocols that will create lasting safety measures for students and education workers alike."

Support Our Students Alberta

A non profit citizens action group advocating for universally accessible and equitable public education in Alberta.

Rad Educators Network

A collective of educators (teachers, professors, researchers, activists, early-childhood educators, etc.) from across Alberta who are advocating for equity and social justice education.

ABdocs4patients

A grassroots, non partisan physician-led organization working to protect and strengthen public healthcare for the safety and wellbeing of all Albertans through collaboration with our communities.

While this exemplifies the type of work that can be done when true collaboration is prioritized, accountability for safety is the responsibility of governments. Grassroots organizations are an important part of democracy, but they cannot replace or exceed the necessary work that government should spearhead, particularly when the safety of its citizens is hanging in the balance.

Because Canada's Chief Medical of Health Officer, Dr. Teresa Tam, noted that the delivery of a COVID-19 vaccine will not immediately put an end to the threat of this virus, the Coalition for a Safer School Relaunch proposed 12 measures that would augment the long term safety and health of Alberta students, education workers and communities at large.

1. Implement a variable class size cap for all grades (K-12), in a way that ensures all physical spaces used for learning prioritize the 2m distance mandate. Because the ability to physically distance is essential, and plays a primary role in mitigating spread of COVID-19, this recommendation is not an arbitrary class size cap but is variable depending upon the physical space of classrooms and number of students that allows all students and teachers to be 2 metres apart. This will require additional teachers to be hired, and for schools to designate cohorts with staggered entry, lunch, recreational and dismissal times.

Grassroots organizations are an important part of democracy, but they cannot replace or exceed the necessary work that government should spearhead, particularly when the safety of its citizens is hanging in the balance.

2. Encourage masks when child-appropriate and adequate physical distancing is not possible, recognizing that masks are not a sufficient replacement for adequate distance. Research has shown that masks are an essential mitigation strategy in areas such as doorways, hallways and bathrooms where students are moving and physical distancing is not maintained. The decision to require masking must be based on age as well as individual cognitive abilities. Family physicians or pediatricians should provide guidance when the decision is unclear.

3. Address transportation for students to and from school, limiting occupancy to reflect physical distancing mandate (2m), incorporate assigned seating, and mandating masks as appropriate. Crowded busing has been a challenge in previous years; this must be addressed given the challenges that COVID-19 presents and possibly additional buses and drivers may be required.

4. Provide each school the ability to access expedited testing and results turnaround for COVID-19. Dedicated access to testing will minimize delays, risk, and unnecessary disruptions in the continuity of education. It is imperative that testing and tracing capacity be continually assessed and adjusted to meet the demands of educators and students to minimize disruption to both learning and work.

5. Alberta Education, in conjunction with Alberta Health, must provide all the necessary personal protective equipment (PPE) for education workers, including masks, shields, disinfectant, and thermometers.

6. Establish clear and transparent protocols for regular screening, positive cases, what defines a school outbreak, and how many positive cases are required for a school closure.

7. Cancel all standardized tests at all grades in recognition of the added stress and trauma testing creates for both students and education workers, and redirect all standardized testing funding to COVID-19 mitigation resources. Measuring standards in a non standard year where the inequity around in-class versus remote learning, and likely frequent disruptions to learning resulting from illnesses and isolation periods will only skew results and magnify inequities.

8. Establish a policy for substitute teachers that minimizes risk of inter-school transmission, ensuring there are a sufficient number of substitute teachers available in anticipation of disruptions due to both illness and isolation needs.

9. In the event of a scenario change (hybrid or complete remote learning), provide adequate resources for families and education workers unable to properly supervise children, with special considerations for children of essential care workers and students with complex needs.

10. Reduce community transmission locally prior to school reopening as well as on-going intensive community COVID-19 mitigation. This is essential to protecting schools.

11. Commit to the health and safety of Alberta students and education workers during a pandemic as the first priority by providing provincial funding to support every public school in meeting these criteria, recognizing the support needed will vary by school.

12. Acknowledge that the start of school can and should be delayed until the resources and parameters for a safer school relaunch itemized above can be secured equitably across Alberta.

PHOTOS PROVIDED COURTESY OF SOS ALBERTA

In the months that followed the Scenario 1 announcement, the Coalition ramped up advocacy efforts to engage citizens and increase awareness of the inadequate school opening approach along several key themes.

Inadequate funding of safety measures

Overall, Alberta invested a meager $10 million[4] for COVID-19 back-to-school equipment, earmarked to purchase hand sanitizer and masks for teachers and students. The responsibility to make a safe reopening plan was thrust upon school divisions, without any additional funds to support infrastructure adjustments such as ventilation assessments and improvements; increased cleaning staff and supplies; increase in number of teachers to plan for smaller class sizes and prioritize physical distancing. In fact, Alberta schools saw collapsed classes as a result of teacher shortages, which resulted from lack of funding for staff[5].

Privatization and erosion of public education

As a part of the national pandemic response, the federal government provided $2 billion for safer school reopenings. Alberta received $262 million[6] and decided that $250 million would be divided equally among each Albertan student — whether they were in a private school classroom of 12 students, or in a public school classroom of 40 students. The government did not distribute these federal funds based on inequitable safety needs but rather as an opportunity to make a political point: money should follow the student to wherever their program of choice happens to be — even if it is a privately run school — effectively turning the federal COVID-19 emergency fund into a voucher system. In Alberta, private schools are publicly funded at a higher per student rate than anywhere in the country at 70%, while public schools and charter schools (Alberta is the only province to allow charter schools) are publicly funded at a full 100% per student. This ideological decision to allow federal funding to follow students even to schools that already have small class sizes, and charge tuition fees into the tens of thousands, illustrates how some governments are leveraging this crisis to create a market for privatization.

Tracking COVID-19 in schools

On September 1, Support Our Students launched their Alberta K-12 School COVID-19 tracker[7] which aggregated media reports of school-based cases. Since then, the tracker[8] has garnered over 1 million views from over

250,000 Albertans, which raised questions (even directed at the Chief Medical Officer) about why the Alberta government was not communicating school cases to the public, and why a grassroots organization was undertaking this important role[9]. Finally on September 9, the government launched a simpler version of a school map showing only "outbreaks" (two or more cases in a 14 day period), and not alerts (single cases related to a school, which still remains an important distinct feature of the SOS tracker).

The road ahead

Two months into the school year, over 500 Alberta schools have reported at least one case of possible infection, with over 200 school outbreaks declared. At the time of writing, upwards of 15,000 documented school-related quarantines have impacted students, educators, and their families. With no additional funding for school safety, online learning support or hiring staff, Alberta schools are being forced to close or move entire grades online[10].

SOS Alberta's COVID-19 School Tracker has proven to be an effective method and focal point of community engagement. The site compiles all the data submitted by Albertans regarding the status of schools in their communities about individual cases, outbreak, watch status and even school closures in a comprehensive and timely fashion. In fact, many Albertans refer to the site's multiple daily information updates that Alberta Health Services and Alberta Education seem unable to provide. Its success is undoubtedly a result of countless hours dedicated by volunteers, but it is also a shining example of what community members can create. Albertans of all walks contribute to the site, confident that a grassroots organization can provide greater transparency and more regular information than their own government.

The Coalition and related community engagement and education materials including the school tracker is a case in point for civic engagement and working towards the collective good. It is in this context that the work of grassroots organizations such as SOS, RAD and ABdocs4patients becomes ever more valuable. The Coalition for Safer School ReLaunch continues to advocate, engage citizens, and raise awareness about the rapidly escalating COVID-19 crisis in schools.

Medeana Moussa began her career in Toronto in marketing, communications and government relations prior to returning to Calgary to start a business that she grew for 10 years. She has four children who all attend public school, and wants to engage with other concerned citizens on the urgent issues facing public education.

Wing Li grew up just outside of Edmonton and attended K-12 public schools in Stony Plain, Alberta. She attended the University of Alberta, graduating with a BSc in Psychology & Biology, and also holds an MSc and a PhD in Neuroscience from the University of Lethbridge. She has taught at the post-secondary level and has worked with science education and knowledge translation initiatives.

Notes

1. https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/calgary/alberta-doctors-outraged-billing-changes-1.5471475

2. https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/edmonton/funding-reduction-alberta-k-12-covid-1.5513803

3. https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/calgary/alberta-schools-in-person-classes-this-fall-1.5657774

4. https://calgaryherald.com/news/local-news/alberta-government-still-quiet-on-distribution-use-of-federal-back-to-school-fund

5. https://www.660citynews.com/2020/10/02/teachers-union-worries-about-shortage-of-substitute-teachers/

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9. https://calgaryherald.com/opinion/columnists/braid-government-and-ahs-need-to-reveal-all-information-on-covid-19-in-schools

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Beyond baguettes and berets

Imagining an anti-racist and culturally relevant French curriculum

Natasha Faroogh

Introduction

The need to apply anti-racist and anti-oppressive lenses to education is slowly becoming recognized and accepted by Ontario school boards, and some large school boards in southern Ontario have started buying culturally relevant texts to support their English language programs.

However, in spite of these gains, Core French as a Second Language (FSL) classes tend to remain Eurocentric, only occasionally Canadian focused, and usually heavily invested in white Francophone cultures.[1] While most French classrooms feature an Eiffel Tower or a French or Quebec flag postered on the walls, far fewer classrooms are likely to have a map of *La Francophonie* highlighting the places where the majority of our new French speaking immigrants come from. It's even less likely that classrooms would have a map of Canada highlighting the many different communities, especially Indigenous communities, where French is spoken.

Even a cursory look at the numbers indicates that centering white French or Québécois cultures in Ontario FSL classrooms does not reflect the lives, backgrounds or realities relevant to many of our students. Today, the majority of the French speaking population worldwide is not white, and not from Europe or the Americas. Further, the majority of French speakers immigrating to Canada, and Ontario, are also not white. Yet, the majority of our FSL programs do not reflect the diverse origins of French speakers and communities in Ontario.

Many Core FSL teachers might contend that all they are doing is teaching the language, usually at the beginner to intermediate level, and that history and culture should not be the focus. Yet, the reason we learn a language is to connect and learn more about other people, their histories, their cultures and their media.

How white Eurocentric curriculum pushes students out of FSL programs

French-speaking Indigenous, Black and non-white racialized children who speak French rarely, if ever, see their identities, their histories,

and their stories featured in the FSL classroom. Similarly, Black and non-white racialized children from families who don't speak French often don't realize that the majority of French speakers globally look more like them than they might initially assume.

And if students come to my grade 9 French class unaware that the majority of daily French speakers around the world and immigrating to Canada are from a variety of backgrounds, they are less likely to be interested in continuing learning a language that they believe is narrow in scope and international relevance.

This is borne out by the research: in the *Toronto District School Board French as a Second Language Program Review: Developmental Evaluation* published in December 2018, the research and development team found that: "Only 30% of French Immersion students felt represented in French-language resources, and even fewer Extended and Core French students (25% and 20%, respectively) felt represented."

This disconnect between French as it's portrayed, and the broader and diverse context of who speaks it, where it's spoken (and why) and who is learning it, is underscored by the choice of textbooks, fiction, non-fiction and media texts available to most schools.

Because the current 2014 Core French curriculum for grades 9–12 focuses predominantly on skills, teachers' choice of texts to enhance and illuminate those skills is absolutely crucial to delivery of the curriculum. However, most popular books and films in Core French courses such as *Le petit Nicholas, Le Petit Prince, Le Fantôme de l'Opéra, Les choristes, L'Étranger, Tintin,* and *Astérix* focus on white characters with occasional racist stereoptying of non-white people's identities.

Popular Core French textbooks such as *Sans Frontieres, Express 9e* that are slowly being phased out are white-centric. Some newer textbooks such as *Tu Parles, Quoi de neuf, Connexions* also remain white-centric although they have incorporated tokenistic mentions of other cultures in some lessons as well as use images of students of different races...but this is hardly a first step to developing deep intercultural understanding. None of these popular textbooks discuss the history or impact of French colonialism on various parts of the globe where French is spoken, collectively known as *La Francophonie*. Nor do they celebrate the rich cultures, histories, and accomplishments of French-speaking communities around the globe.

Daily French speakers resided in the following areas in 2018

44.4% of daily French speakers resided in Sub-Saharan Africa and the Indian Ocean

14.9% in North Africa and the Near East (South-West Asia)

33.4% resided in Europe

7% in America and the Caribbean

0.3% in Asia and Oceania

Quéméner et al., 2019

2011 Statistics Canada Study

74,500 French as a First Official Language Speakers (FOLS) immigrated outside of Quebec

55% of this group were visible minorities

34% of all (including White) French FOLS immigrants identify as Black and 8% as Arab

The majority settled in major cities such as Toronto, Ottawa and Vancouver

Houle et al., 2017

Imagining *E. Intercultural Understanding* as a strand

Overall Expectations in bold; Specific Expectations listed.

E1. Learning about First Nations, Métis & Inuit French-speaking Communities

E1.1. Introduction to the history of French colonialism in Canada, including treaties, Indigenous rights and history and legacy of residential schools

E1.2. Learning about Indigenous identities, histories, resistance

E1.3. Learning about contemporary Indigenous peoples' accomplishments and concerns through media about Indigenous communities that speak French

E1.4. Learning about and/or connecting with Indigenous French-speaking communities, organizations, media

E2. Learning about *La Francophonie* globally

E2.1. Introduction to the history of French colonialism globally and its effects on Asia, Africa and the African Diaspora; French as a *lingua franca*

E2.2. Learning about aspects of various histories, peoples, cultures and languages (including Creoles, Pidgins and Vernaculars of French)

E2.3. Learning about the ways various markers of identity: race, religion, language, gender, sexuality, class, etc. are negotiated in various French-speaking states

E2.4. Learning about and/or connecting with global French-speaking communities, organizations, media

E3. Learning about French-speaking Communities in and Migrations to Canada

E3.1. Introduction to contemporary histories of communities that move from various parts of *la francophonie* to Canada; specific attention to African, Caribbean and Asian French-speaking communities

E3.2. Introduction to human geography: consideration of socio-political, socio-economic and environmental factors of French-speaking communities who migrate to Canada and the impacts of colonial histories

E3.3. Learning about settler Francophone communities in Canada, especially Franco-Ontarian, Québécois and Acadian settlements

E3.4. Learning about and/or connecting with Canadian and immigrant French-speaking communities, organizations, media

Critique of current Core French curriculum and implementation

Although the current Core French curriculum does include the overall expectation "Inter-cultural Understanding" in each of the four curricular strands — Listening, Speaking, Reading and Writing — this expectation is addressed in an ahistorical way, which means it is often tokenized. Currently students are asked to consider "Africa and Asia's contributions to *La Francophonie,*" in grade 9 (which is the last year of mandatory French), but not the historical context or effects of colonialism or specifically why French has become a language widely spoken around the world. In fact, apart from a vague direction to learn about cultures and sociolinguistic conventions from "Asia and Africa", no specific content is referenced or included in this section. However, without specific content to cover, teachers' treatment of intercultural understanding often remains tokenistic and at best a vague attempt to include different cultures.

Further, the current Core French curriculum does not address learning about Indigenous French-speaking communities and the effects of colonialism, residential schools, and genocide on Indigenous cultures, languages, and peoples in any of its overall expectations. Applying the Truth and Reconciliation Calls to Actions (62 and 63) when the curriculum is updated is an imperative first step toward *actual* truth and reconciliation.

Imagining an anti-racist and culturally relevant FSL curriculum

An FSL classroom with a genuine interest in intercultural understanding[2] would also consider France and Canada's roles in slavery, genocide, stealing of land and cultural artifacts, continued settler colonialism by Canada on Indigenous peoples' lands and continued colonialism by France in Africa and the Caribbean. Perhaps even more crucially, it would consider the power, resistance, and survival of peoples globally and at home.

If we were to incorporate culturally relevant pedagogy, as outlined by Gloria Landson-Billings, into how we teach French, we would celebrate the many different cultures and linguistic identities of people who speak French at home in our classrooms and around the globe. Particular attention would be made to how French and its vernaculars is actually used by different communities migrating to and settled in Canada.

A further examination of geography, politics and policy on histories of impoverishing communities through racist immigration laws, and contemporary economic exploitation of former colonies through military and trade threats could be made at senior levels by teachers and students interested in social justice education.

Because this material may be difficult to incorporate without guidance, rather than integrating "Intercultural Understanding" into the existing four strands, I suggest making this into its own (fifth) strand in the next curriculum update, which would allow for more direction in regards to content. The overall expectations of the new strand would include the histories, cultures and sociolinguistic uses of language of various French-speaking communities. (See highlighted section on page 18.)

If students come to my grade 9 French class unaware that the majority of daily French speakers around the world and immigrating to Canada are from a variety of backgrounds, they are less likely to be interested in continuing learning a language that they believe is narrow in scope and international relevance.

Note that this is my preliminary attempt at thinking about future Core French curriculum; any formal curriculum writing must be written in consultation with French speaking Indigenous and Black communities in Ontario.

Building a stronger French as a second language (FSL) program

Imagine students' engagement if we truly decentered white Eurocentric pedagogy entirely and explored the breadth of experience and knowledge to be found in learning about different peoples and their cultures around the world and as they immigrate to Canada. The shifting educational landscape provides educators and education advocates with an opportunity to truly engage in anti-racist, anti-oppressive education through a culturally relevant pedagogy.

The language classroom is a very special place, with the particular freedom of being able to engage with students in learning about their world through the process and practice of communication. Decentering colonial learning of the French language and centering learning about diverse peoples' histories, cultures and communities engages students, and underscores the relevance of learning French.

Educators can choose to build an anti-racist practice, or uphold the colonial status quo, but the process of learning language is never neutral.

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Author's note

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Notes

1. It's worth noting that this is not only a problem in Core French but in French Immersion as well. Rachel Marika Kunnas (2019) argues that the French immersion curriculum has a serious issue of white and Eurocentric curriculum. Kunnas' work takes an in-depth analysis of when, how often, and how different identities are included in the French immersion curriculum. Kunnas concludes that the French immersion curriculum from grades 1 to 12 has white bias and additive representations of other races. Both Core French and French Immersion Programs need serious curriculum overhauls to develop anti-racist and culturally relevant FSL curriculum.

2. While this aspect of the curriculum could be delivered in French for students in Extended or Immersion French, I believe that, depending on students' proficiency, using English or students' first languages *in conjunction with French* in Core French programs is permissible to deliver this crucial information about the development of the French language worldwide.

Saying no to the status quo

Rebuilding Ontario's public education system in the time of COVID-19

Kelly Iggers

Ontario has its committed defenders of public education, but public opinion rarely converges in such a critical mass as to influence significant policy change. The COVID-19 pandemic, however, presented the public with a new and almost universally compelling rationale for change.

Five months into a global pandemic, people were keenly aware of the impact of school closures and the need to resume in-person schooling. Children's well-being, mental health and academic progress; parents' well-being, mental health, and ability to work; and the health of the economy all depended on schools reopening safely.

When the provincial government announced a plan for school reopening that maintained pre-pandemic class sizes and did little else to modify school conditions, opposition to the plan was fast, fierce and widespread. My own petition for reduced class sizes gained more than 200,000 signatures in a matter of days. And across the province, countless Ontarians raised their voices to demand a safer school reopening plan.

In this context of broad concern, I began contacting others with an invitation to work together, though I had no experience in organizing. I reached out via email and Twitter to parents, grandparents, educators, students, doctors, healthcare workers, education experts, mental health professionals, school bus drivers, business owners, public figures, and others who I could see were committed to this issue. These contacts, in turn, reached out to others in their networks and, one evening in late August, dozens of people came together in a virtual meet to form Ontario SAFE: a grassroots group of advocates from various disciplines, committed to fighting for safe and equitable schools.

To be clear, there was plenty of room for change in Ontario's education system even before COVID-19 impacted schools. Decades of underfunding have left us with crowded classrooms, inadequate resources to support student mental health, continually reduced support for students with special needs, and a $16.3 billion backlog in school repairs. Many of these shortcomings date back to the cuts of the Mike Harris era in the 1990s, but nine years of teaching have shown me that, sadly, underfunding is perpetual.

By provoking widespread public interest in education and heightening the need for safe school conditions, the COVID-19 crisis set the scene for broad-based advocacy and an opportunity to strengthen public education in Ontario.

The very nature of COVID-19 necessitates changes in schools. The most unmistakable example of this is class size, and it was this issue in particular that brought Ontario SAFE together. Public health advice has been clear since early in the pandemic: COVID-19 spreads best in conditions of close contact, crowded places and closed spaces. A typical public school classroom in Ontario almost comically comprises all of these conditions: elementary and secondary school classes regularly approach or exceed 30 students, many school buildings lack decent ventilation, and students and school staff occupy these enclosed spaces for hours every day.

Evidence supports the need for small class sizes, as does advice from experts. In their July 29, 2020 report, “COVID-19: Guidance for School Reopening,” the Hospital for Sick Children in Toronto stated clearly that “smaller class sizes should be a priority strategy” in Ontario’s plan to reopen schools. Sending students back to school in full sized classes flew in the face of direct public health guidance.

While there’s no doubt that systems and social policies were failing vulnerable Ontarians long before COVID-19, the pandemic has laid bare the severity of these inequities. Data released by Toronto Public Health in July showed that racialized residents of the city were dramatically overrepresented in COVID-19 cases, accounting for 83% of infections, while

PHOTO SUPPLIED BY ONTARIO SAFE

The COVID-19 crisis has illuminated needs and shortcomings in our education system, now urgent in our current circumstances. At the same time, it has made school conditions broadly relevant, creating an opportunity to push for positive changes with unprecedented public support.

making up just over half of the city's population. People in low-income households were also significantly overrepresented. Data released by Ottawa Public Health in September showed a disproportionately high number of positive cases among racialized people. While province-wide data aren't available, it is widely acknowledged that COVID-19 outcomes are closely tied to social determinants of health. In a report released in May entitled "COVID-19 — What We Know So Far About Social Determinants of Health," Public Health Ontario pointed to the importance of race, socioeconomic status, and other social factors in determining risk of COVID-19 infection.

Given the dramatically higher known risks to racialized, marginalized, and low-income Ontarians, Ontario's school plan represents a massive failure to protect vulnerable Ontarians. By sending students back to full-sized classes, in contradiction of evidence and expert advice, Ontario's plan unquestionably hurts racialized and low-income people the most.

With the need for small class sizes so clear, this issue became a rallying cry, and it fueled the organizing efforts of Ontario SAFE. But it is not the only area where change is needed. The pandemic has drawn attention to a number of other issues in education, including the need for improved access to mental health support for students; and the dire level of disrepair in Ontario's schools. What all of these needs have in common, in addition to being amplified by the current crisis, is that they have been the focus of education advocates for years. All of these reforms, while made urgent by COVID-19, would offer tremendous benefit to students and communities outside the context of the pandemic. Imagine a province in which small class sizes allow students' academic, social, emotional, mental, and physical needs to be supported; where equity-based measures in education policy provide vulnerable students with the support they need to thrive; where students have access to mental health supports and services when they need them; and where learning takes place in structurally safe and well-maintained buildings. The pandemic may have amplified the need for all of this, but the needs were always there. If the pandemic provides the impetus to bring about these changes, it will not only support public health and safety; it will strengthen public education.

Of course, herein may lie the explanation for our government's apparent unwillingness to adopt these measures. Policies such as the ones outlined here, despite their obvious value for public health, would run contrary to two and a half years of actions that strip resources from the system and effectively weaken public education. Despite the public outcry, evidence, and clear advice from experts telling us that significant investment in school safety is needed, this government has not been willing to invest in measures that would set a precedent of support for education. So while the current moment offers hope for progressive change, it's far from a given.

We are at a critical moment. The COVID-19 crisis has illuminated existing and new needs and shortcomings in our education system, now urgent in our current circumstances. At the same time, it has made school conditions broadly relevant, creating an opportunity to push for positive changes with unprecedented public support. Ontario SAFE was born out of these circumstances: a coalition of voices representing a wide range of identities, perspectives, and disciplines, coming together out of shared concern. But it is an example of a larger movement. We stand alongside many other groups, networks, organizations, and committed individuals building solidarity and advocating on these or related issues.

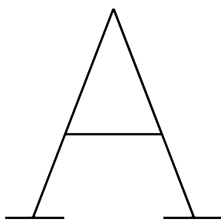
With the second wave of COVID-19 escalating, and the continued resistance of the provincial government to make meaningful changes in schools, our next steps are uncertain. The frenzied momentum of August has given way to a slower pace as we attempt to get our bearings for a long haul. But as we continue this work, this context of broad solidarity means that we don't do it alone. If we can harness that drive and shared concern, this may be an opportunity to re-envision and transform public education in Ontario.

Kelly Iggers is an elementary school teacher and parent in Toronto. She is the founder of Ontario SAFE (Safety Advocacy for Education), a grassroots advocacy group fighting for safe and equitable conditions in public education.

Understanding food systems

An essential part of food literacy education

Gary Hoyer



Although broadly applied, food literacy describes the idea of proficiency in food related skills and knowledge. Sonja Schnögl et al., describe it as ‘knowing where our food comes from; knowing what happens to it, how to cook it, and how to prepare it’.

Knowledge of food systems is an important part of a food literacy education. It intersects food, agriculture, and health and is relevant to many branches of biology: botany, ecology, evolutionary biology, biochemistry, health, agriculture, and genetics. It’s crucial for students to learn about good food systems that can advance healthy eating policies, improve nutrition, change dietary preferences over a lifetime, aid environmental health, potentially improve food security, and reduce GHG emissions. It also provides important context to the onslaught of advertising by companies who control major portions of our food value- and supply-chain(s), and who may be motivated more by profit than consumers’ well-being.

A nominal amount of food system instruction is offered at many schools, but it is not a formal part of K-12 curriculum. Activities are animated mainly by school champions and NGOs, but within the school system, opportunities exist to build more food education into the Ontario Student Nutrition and other programs. Course material on food systems can be threaded through science classes, and schools can integrate experiential activities such as field trips to farms, greenhouses, and farmers’ markets, farmer classroom visits, and school gardens.

These programs aren’t just beneficial, they would likely be popular with students too. A recent study by Yussra Ebrahim found that more than 50% of high school students were interested in a course about food systems and 60% care about where their food comes from. And after just one introductory lesson, that number jumped to over 60%.

Students and faculty at George Brown College in Toronto recently completed a research study on Farm to School approaches. Part of our work included delivering more than 30 food literacy workshops to middle and secondary school students across the GTA. The workshops delivered multiple food literacy activities that engaged students in brainstorming sessions and included a practical component, a hands-on culinary workshop.

By successfully completing the workshops, students were more able to understand the

concepts of food systems, food security, health, diet, and sustainability and became more capable of connecting this knowledge to their own health and well-being. They learned that good food is a right and developed culinary skills, learning techniques and methods of food preparation in a safe, clean, organized, and timely manner. These types of lessons are now taking place virtually.

School gardens offer excellent opportunities for a food system education, providing a highly effective hands-on learning tool. The Ottewell Junior High School in Edmonton, for instance, maintains a functional food garden where vegetables and fruit are grown to be prepared, consumed and disposed of (composted), and studied by students. Students learn to choose seeds, plant and care for them. They then prepare meals with these homegrown ingredients. Using worms to make compost, the students fertilize the soil and learn how much water and care each plant needs to produce food.

An example from the U.S. is Slow Food Denver's Seed-To-Table School Food program for Denver Public Schools where students grow fresh fruits and vegetables in school gardens. A coalition of over 50 schools host garden programs with year-round activities that involve students in all aspects of planting, growing, harvesting, cooking, and eating fresh produce from their gardens. February starts with seed-starting activities in the classrooms using grow tables. By mid-May, the students are planting their seedlings in the ground and taking home a plant to start their own gardens. Throughout the summer, volunteers (many of whom are students) take care of the garden by watering and weeding. By planning the planting carefully, bountiful crops are ready when the students return to school in late August. Soon after Labor Day, the program kicks into high gear with gardens full of fresh produce and students eager to participate in food-related activities. Students eat healthy hyper-local food, become food literate, and learn the importance of food systems and their impact on different important sectors of their lives.

At École Peter Greer Elementary in Lake Country, BC the Plant a Seed & See What Grows Foundation funded a school garden. Fifth and sixth grade students began an inquiry into how they could make their school a healthier place. They saw an opportunity for place-based learning with a school edible garden. They committed to an outdoor learning garden and began the work of scouting potential locations, developing blueprints for these spaces, and seeking feedback from other classes. The school also purchased a Garden Tower to grow leafy greens indoors over the winter months. Both students and teachers are learning about the environment and how they can make healthy, sustainable choices in their activities and what they eat.

It is crucial to engage students in food literacy and food system education at school, making it part of science and nutrition curriculum, incorporating both theory and hands-on activities. Despite a barrage of food marketing, children and adolescents will be empowered as they build knowledge and form lifestyle habits that stay with them forever. The Ontario Student Nutrition programs are a start, but there is plenty of room for school gardens, farm to school efforts, and similar programs to grow. It's time that food literacy education gets full support from all levels of government.

Gary Hoyer is a Professor at George Brown College, a chef, food service consultant, restaurateur and sustainability and organic food advocate. He is also the author of a recent report, cookbook, and manual on the Farm to School Approach.

Less of a material world

Ontario's brisk walk away from printed textbooks

Jeremy Tompkins

COVID-19 appears to be the emergency that changes everything, even mobilizing the spending power of governments. But one of the big changes was already underway: people are more likely interacting with their mobile phone, tablet or laptop computer rather than with a handheld book.

Those old schoolbooks

Electronic substitutes for books, cash, even restaurant menus are increasingly popular, and no one — government, most academics, even publishers — attending the book's funeral appears particularly upset. The attractiveness of lugging around those pulp barbells has been questioned for a generation.

The textbook's day, and its traditional use, is mostly already over. Publishing is doing ok, but print is in decline. Statistics Canada reported in May 2020 that the industry's operating revenue had grown 2% between 2016 and 2018.[1] Margins slimmed to 7.6% but there's a plan underway to capture more profit. It involves less paper, and reaching fewer schools. Printing is expensive. So is shipping.

The shift to electronic and online media is only the latest nudge in the textbook's long fall from peak production in the 1960s and '70s. Almost half of Canada's English speakers reside in Ontario and the province accounted for 67% of industry revenue in 2018.

Greater Toronto's role as a publishing heavyweight can, in part, be traced to the Ministry of Education's 1951 decision to make multiple textbooks available for individual courses. Because Ontario's network of public and separate schools is the country's largest book buyer, the government's regulatory decision boosted a hopeful and competitive domestic publishing industry. *Circular 14,* Ontario's former annual series of authorized textbooks listed 35 publishers in 1965, more than twice the number making a contribution in 1950. In 1980 the Ministry received 452 textbook submissions from publishers.

With competition, an annual approval process was staffed up to approximately 40 education officers reviewing hundreds of books a year in cooperation with rosters of teachers and professors, priests, curators and other community specialists hired for their textbook reviews. *Circular 14* was distributed to other provinces and territories. Industry and government representatives regularly remarked on Ontario's importance to educational publishing. The province, not the United States, was the elephant

next door for every other provincial education ministry with the potential exception of Quebec. When Ontario made anti-competitive decisions, the rest of the country suffered.

The Ministry began receiving all sorts of books that publishers hoped would find customers in the education market. Many books were rejected, most because they didn't conform with submission guidelines. Others, though, were simply inconsistent with government's bias, sometimes even after majorities of reviewers had already recommended their use; for example, books that openly and honestly discussed business strategy, active citizenship, drugs, Britain and Canada's discrimination against women, Indigenous Canadians and minorities and their histories.

According to Ontario's *Education Act*, it's the Minister of Education's responsibility "to select and approve for use in schools textbooks, library books and other learning materials."[2] If the government chooses to censor the books, they can. No Conservative, Liberal or NDP administration has chosen to surrender this power. The number of submissions treated in this manner, just from the 1960s to 1980s, numbers in the hundreds based on my archival research.[3]

Censorship is not the only obstacle for educational publishers. Government's regular tightening of congruency requirements narrowed what kind of textbook purchases could be reimbursed. In 1976 a textbook only had to "contribute significantly to a unit of instruction" whereas in 1979 it had to cover 10% of a "particular course." The congruency requirement jumped to 50% in 1997 and then 85% in 1998, sealing a trend toward one big text and permitting less room for smaller publishers to operate.

The Conservative provincial government outsourced textbook evaluation in the late 1990s, and when elected the Liberals did not reverse course. Before declaring bankruptcy in March 2018, Curriculum Services Canada (CSC), the external agency contracted to administer the evaluation process, was charging publishers $3,000 per submission for a shrunken peer review.[4] Community involvement in the process declined while representation from the corporate sector increased: CSC's board of directors included members from banking and law.

With all these challenges, it's no surprise if educational publishing is seen as a legacy revenue stream by many of Canada's publishers. What had been hundreds of textbooks submissions annually into the 1980s shrunk to 28 for 2009-10. The number of publishers with authorized textbooks circulating in Ontario has been reduced to where it was in 1950 — prior to competition.

But the total number is only part of the story. Laura Pinto warned *Our Schools/Our Selves* readers in 2005 that publishers were using industry association meetings and discussions with authors and educators to examine which books competitors had in development to avoid direct competition.[5] Pinto found that the three largest companies (then Thomson Nelson, McGraw-Hill Ryerson and Pearson) controlled 92% of the market. And there was more trouble. Consultant PricewaterhouseCoopers (PwC) predicted that the Fair Dealing Guidelines adopted by public education associations in 2012, which formalized "the position that its members are effectively not required to pay for the copying… by virtue of the…*Copyright Act*," could cause smaller publishers to leave the market entirely.[6] From the publishers' perspective, government isn't doing enough to protect its intellectual property. Statistics Canada reported that educational sales declined 10% between 2016 and 2018.

Who writes for free?

Ontario once concerned itself with the health of domestic publishing. The loss of Canada's ability to write its own story was considered a threat to national identity. Whether that's still true, PwC suggests that government is now primarily investing in technology. Google's Classroom learning management system (LMS) and Kitchener's D2L's Brightspace are competing and winning across Canada, as is Microsoft Teams. The transformation has created a new cottage industry to support these platforms.

This certainly isn't new: alternatives to print-based classroom media have been developing for years. The Greater Victoria School District introduced students to Google cloud-based learning tools in October 2017,[7] but remember Ontario began developing a broadcast television system with TVO in the 1970s. Computer disk learning systems were another milestone between print and social media.

Prior to the pandemic, Ontario had announced that secondary school students would begin taking at least four of 30 credits online in order to graduate (this was later reduced to two). The government said it was "committed to modernizing and supporting students and families in innovative ways…no matter where they live in Ontario," although critics will argue that Ontario was always more "committed" to laying off teachers.

So where is the original content for the accelerated online learning revolution going to come from? Up to Grade 6, Ontario says it is going to rely more heavily on TVO. Top Hat, the Toronto-based LMS provider formed by two University of Waterloo graduates, announced last May that it would acquire longtime education publisher Nelson, but focus on digitizing its print catalogue for the post-secondary market.

For high school students, those same unloved and aging textbooks, along with public and corporate supplementary material, are still providing much of the day-to-day content, but sectioned and scanned into the Cloud. PwC claimed K-12 teachers photocopy 350 million pages of content each year, eliminating the sale of tens of millions of books. One of the benefits of a learning management system (LMS) is the opportunity to lower printing costs. Canada's carve-out for copyright permitted teachers to photocopy at will, but the LMS removes even the need to photocopy. Scan once, upload to a central database accessible to students, and *voila*!

The transition to online learning enables intellectual property rights and the province's congruency policy to be bypassed with greater ease. So far this disruption has meant financial loss for publishers and the dismissal of government regulation. But there is also the promise of a rejuvenated space for small publishers to discover niches and grow. Subjects that are now just chapters in large expensive textbooks by transnational publishers, materializing only after complex project management, could theoretically shrink back to being smaller books on more discrete subjects.

Ontario has the leverage to make it happen. Were the Ministry of Education to reunite government, publishers and community with in-house peer review for smaller forms of classroom materials, such as it had with the *Circular 14* authorization, industry would respond. Regular, ongoing funding of textual materials, which was always puny compared with other budget items, would be on-message for the current administration by signalling to publishers that the province was once again "open for business." Teachers and students would benefit from a constantly refreshed catalogue

So much innovation could be happening that isn't. While the replacement *Trillium List* online database has enabled government and industry to work on an as-needed basis, decision-making has become less transparent. When a textbook or other media is withdrawn from circulation, its electronic record mostly vanishes. And while the digital infrastructure permits more information to be shared with more people, here the opposite has happened. Far from permitting citizens more engagement with and understanding of their own education, recent decisions ensure that the real control remains with the government and its friends, with only the illusion of openness.

While a librarian for telecommunication service providers based in Toronto and Winnipeg, **Jeremy Tompkins** ran content management systems (CMS) and offered reference services for internal client groups. He plans to make the second edition of his book *No School For Suckers* available for publication in 2021.

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Plan? What plan?

Re-opening Saskatchewan's schools

Colleen Bell and Charles Smith

Following the announcement of the 2020 Saskatchewan election results, then-Education Minister Gordan Wyatt told the media that he is "proud of the people of Saskatchewan for re-electing us."

The paternalism of this sentiment is palpable and yet profoundly ironic given that the government's hands off approach has been so minimal that any success in students returning to school has been left to local school boards, dedicated teachers and education workers, caregivers and students, all of whom have been willing to sacrifice their safety in order to maintain a semblance of quality education.

Plan? What plan?

On June 9, 2020, then-Education Minister Gordon Wyant announced that after consultation with numerous education stakeholders, that Saskatchewan children would be going back to school in September. He affirmed that the "health and safety of our students, our staff, and our caregivers" was his priority, but offered no details on the back to school plan, only committing to releasing those later in the summer. Although many Saskatchewan residents were confused that such an announcement could be made without first working through the policy priorities and the funding commitments necessary to implement them, many also recognized that the changing nature of the COVID-19 crisis demanded time to properly implement such a plan.

It was therefore with a great deal of astonishment that nearly two months later, the Ministry of Education released a planning document that came with ambiguous safety measures and no new funding commitments to actually implementing that plan. As part of its Safe Schools Plan, the government created a four tier safety level which, vaguely defined and lacking thresholds, provided no clarity on what would trigger each safety phase. Choosing to return to classes at Level 1, the Minister stated that he was committed to beginning school as "close to normal" as possible. What, exactly, is normal about a pandemic?

Pressed on these matters, the Ministry chose to download much of the responsibility for worker and student safety on to local school boards, providing only the $40 million in savings that had occurred between March and June when schools were shuttered. This created an uneven level of protection for staff and students; for example, the public school division in many cities made masks mandatory

for grades 4-12, while the Catholic schools only made them mandatory for grades 9-12 and in high traffic areas. The province's plans also forgot about substitute teachers. In our gig economy, subs must travel from school to school in order to cobble together enough work to make ends meet. Given the tragedy of death that was greatly exacerbated by healthcare staff having to move between long-term care homes in the earlier days of the pandemic, a new structure was clearly needed. But this was lacking from both the education minister and the government.

The crisis of funding and classroom sizes

Perhaps the greatest insult to teachers, education workers and students is that the province's so-called plan came with no COVID-19 emergency funding to school boards. Although school divisions were informed that they could access a $200 million dollar contingency fund, there was no process for school divisions to apply. The $40 million in savings to boards that the province agreed to release was not new money. The only life-line in new funding came from the federal government who committed $74.9 million in additional funding to help schools open safely. The problem with even these levels of support, as the president of the Saskatchewan Teachers' Union (STF) Patrick Maze noted, was that their arrival five months later, when students were walking through the doors, was too little too late.

The weight of the pandemic was hitting teachers hard, as upwards of 80% of teachers reported feeling an emotional disconnection with their students. What was clear, these teachers reported, was that the pandemic was exposing deep inequalities in our communities, inequities being made worse by government inaction.

The non-funding announcement created a public relations nightmare for Wyant and the government. Prior to the pandemic, the province refused to negotiate with the STF over the contentious issue of classroom size. During bargaining, reports from government and the teachers' union differed on the province's student-teacher ratios, with government stating that class size averaged anywhere between 14.5 and 19 students per classroom, with the STF stating that teachers' themselves were showing that their classes ranged from 22 to 40 students per class. Anecdotally, the classrooms in the schools attended by our children were much closer to the averages highlighted by the teachers' union.

Given the real issue of classroom size for teachers, the STF was adamant that no new agreement would be signed if it did not address the growing crisis of classroom size in the province. Negotiations moved to a stalemate and the teachers voted to increase job action, which included the possibility of a strike. When the pandemic hit in March, however, the STF backtracked and signed the deal on the table prior to the commitment to job action.

The failure of the province to address classroom size meant that, according to the STF, students were going back to classes with as many as 40 students, and that there was no new money for educational assistants to assist students with learning or behavioural disabilities, with many returning to aging schools with poor ventilation. One of the most important pieces of information that we have learned about this virus is that it is airborne. Good ventilation, even more than sanitized surfaces, is critical to reducing transmission. And yet, it was not possible to prioritize improving ventilation because the money was so late in coming and also not enough.

Addressing the problem of overcrowded classrooms was precluded by this compressed time frame. Given this, it was perhaps not surprising that, according to a national survey, almost 73% of the province's teachers reported that they were worried about the impact of the pandemic on their mental health and the overall health of their students. Similarly, the weight of the pandemic was hitting teachers hard, as upwards of 80% of teachers in the province reported feeling an emotional disconnection with their students. What was clear, these teachers reported, was that the pandemic was exposing deep inequalities in our communities, inequities being made worse by government inaction.

The criticism of the non-plan was intense. Parents groups, doctors, the teachers' union and thousands of citizens voiced their concerns through open letters, petitions and public statements. This criticism pushed the government to commit an additional $40 million in support for local boards to purchase PPE, but the issue of classroom size, ventilation, and workers and student safety remains abstract.

Indigenous students

Several Indigenous communities in Saskatchewan took a different route. As education falls under Indigenous jurisdiction, communities like the Pasqua First Nation surveyed leaders, teachers, and parents to develop a real return to class plan over the summer months. In Pasqua, the school groups worked with a locally-owned

metal company to create plexiglass barriers to separate students, while classrooms would be capped at 15 students. The Pasqua First Nation also added portable sinks and foot-pump sanitation stations throughout its buildings. Similarly, Cowessess First Nation capped classroom size at 10 students per classroom and implemented a designated bus plan. These plans took classroom size and improved PPE access seriously and did not download these decisions to boards and schools alone. In our opinion, this represented real leadership on a return-to-school plan.

However, with less overall funding for First Nations' schools in comparison to provincial schools, there are simply fewer resources to deal effectively with the risk. For the more than 20 schools that have been closed in First Nations communities due to COVID-19, chronically poor internet service makes remote learning extremely difficult.

As we are writing this piece, many First Nation communities throughout the province are experiencing COIVD-19 rates at four times higher than the rest of the population, deepening the impact of systematic underfunding by federal and provincial governments of all political stripes. Other nations, such as the Fond Du Lac Denesuline First Nation, are dealing with a double crisis of a COVID-19 outbreak alongside a water service failure. Although the federal government is to blame for failing to address some of these problems, the provincial government has made zero effort to support First Nations of Saskatchewan as they grapple with these issues.

Conclusions

The government's "Safe Schools Plan" was not really a plan. Rather, it devolved responsibility to school divisions to figure it out themselves and positioned the government to review these plans. The argument was that school divisions are closer to the issue and thus better positioned to come up with plans that would work for their context. However, the counter argument is that leaving it up to divisions creates disparities in safety protocols with some children and teachers more vulnerable than others. It also conveniently positions school divisions to take the blame for outbreaks while letting the government off the hook.

The lack of a safe reopening for schools across the province resulted in unsafe working conditions for teachers and staff, and unsafe learning conditions for children. And, as a result, teachers and support staff are overwhelmed with the raft of extra cleaning, curriculum management, and rules that have been off-loaded to them, with many now having to integrate distance learning into their teaching, monitoring and policing student PPE, and trying to manage the emotional weight of a deadly disease in our community.

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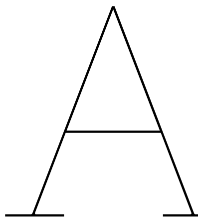
Manitoba's post-pandemic learning plan

A timeline of "immediately," a budget of "nothing"

Melissa Bowman Wilson



t the time of writing, it's the beginning of November, and Manitoba's public-school teachers are busy writing report cards — if they can stay awake. What is normally a singularly intensive exercise for teachers has, in 2020 form, become just another in a long line of hurdles that teachers must clear in an increasingly complicated race to keep schools safe, parents working, and the economy ticking along.

By mid-October, rapidly escalating case counts and test-positivity rates led the provincial government to announce sweeping changes for schools across the Winnipeg metropolitan area (a directive that has since been extended to include most of the province).

Gone were the caveats of "when possible" that qualified previous directives. Departing from the inadequate but relatively clear system of green, yellow and red provisions, the government instructed schools to pivot to a new hybrid of these plans: a seasonally appropriate, if logistically impossible, "Code Orange."

Suddenly, students *did* require the long-recommended two meters of space, an arrangement that would have been challenging to implement at the beginning of the school year, but in mid-October, needed to be put in place by teachers over the course of a weekend. While moving desks and repurposing gymnasiums, K-8 teachers had the opportunity to plan how they might also offer the remote learning that was mandated for any classroom that was not a hybrid of Mary Poppins' carpet bag and the TARDIS. The province presumed all of this was possible without increased staffing.

These last-minute provisions may indeed have been "possible." But they did not come without significant costs.

The cost of providing adequate space to many students turned out to be 50%–66% of a teacher. Given a timeline of "immediately" and a budget of "nothing" the solution to overcrowded classrooms and a mandate to provide remote learning was to ask the impossible of our educators. "Duplex" teachers now split their time between two less-populated classrooms, hoping that their lessons manage to "land"

once the students are left under the supervision of an educational assistant. “Triplex” teachers do the same, with the additional task of bending the space-time continuum to provide content and educational support to students learning remotely.

To say this is unsustainable is an understatement. Educators and advocates in Manitoba wrote an open letter to the Premier and Minister of Education on November 8th requesting funding for reduced class sizes, additional teachers, and other things deemed essential to preventing a collapse of the education system. But even should funds be released, it will be difficult to find qualified applicants for many of the positions that must be filled — especially in French Immersion programs whose enrollments have swollen over the past decade. Constant demand for substitute teachers outstrips what was already a limited supply. As isolation guidelines become more stringent, we are hovering on the precipice of a crisis.

Code Orange is, in effect, code for “keep kids in the schools, whatever the costs,” so long as those costs are not at the expense of Manitoba’s provincial economy. While most will agree that the multiple roles schools play in the lives of families are absolutely critical, the clear priority of the provincial government seems to be allowing parents to support the economy and pay their bills, unfettered by child care concerns.

Kelvin Goertzen, Manitoba’s Minister of Education, participated in two webinars in spring of 2020 where he stated that “(e)ducation...maybe shouldn’t even be primarily a state activity.” Given the Minister’s apparent preference for private education, it is easy to imagine that the exponential increase in homeschooling numbers in 2020 could be considered internally as a step in the right direction rather than an indictment of the government’s handling of this crisis.

While parents ponder news conferences, struggling to decipher what constantly changing directives mean for their children’s education, the government is also quietly moving to begin implementation of the still-unpublished recommendations of the Manitoba Commission’s K-12 Education Review. This commission is led by consultant Avis Glaze, whose Nova Scotia review ushered in sweeping changes to education in that province. When Manitoba’s Minister of Education announced on November 9th that it was working to hire 100 teachers and education assistants to staff a “remote learning resource centre”, many Manitobans were left wondering if this was a legitimate response to the concerns articulated by educators, or simply a step in the direction outlined by this review.

Add to this the government’s expressed interest in re-jigging Manitoba’s post-secondary institutions to directly serve the labour market, and it begins to appear that the government’s failure to meet educational needs during this pandemic may not solely be due to neglect or lack of awareness. Perhaps everything is proceeding according to plan.

Is *this* the new normal?

Melissa Bowman Wilson is a Winnipeg parent, community advocate, and a stalwart supporter of public education. She was a candidate for school trustee in Ward 4 in the 2020 Winnipeg School Division byelection, which was cancelled due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

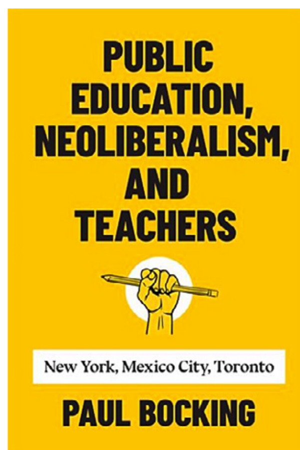
Unpacking NAFTA's legacy

Mobilizing worker autonomy to resist neoliberalism in education

Larry Kuehn reviews *Public Education, Neoliberalism, and Teachers: New York, Mexico City, Toronto*, by Paul Bocking (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2020)

When the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) was negotiated in the 1990s, one of the many questions was the potential impact on public education in the three countries of the US, Mexico and Canada. Paul Bocking's look at education in the three NAFTA countries 25 years later helps to answer the question. The short version is that NAFTA probably had little direct impact on public education, but the neoliberal forces that created NAFTA did lead to some convergence, particularly on the experience of teachers and limits on their professional autonomy.

Bocking carried out case studies in New York, Toronto and Mexico City, focusing on these significant metropolitan areas of the US, Canada and Mexico. He chose them not because he thinks the schools in each of the countries are the same as in these cities, but because what happens there is broadly representative of forces acting on education and is an influential source of ideas about education policy and practice.



Before getting into the case studies, Bocking explores the dimensions and importance of professional autonomy for teachers as a key to successful public education. It is autonomy in identifying instructional strategies, selection of resources, choosing timing, methods and types of assessment that both provide professional satisfaction and allow the differentiation of education that best serves the students. Developing capacity for judgment comes from professional training, experience and sharing with colleagues.

Bocking then provides a compressed history of how teacher unions have served to support professional autonomy and how neoliberal policies have served to restrict that autonomy.

It is the global hegemony of neoliberal policies that provides the connecting link between the experiences of teachers in these three different national contexts. The policies include austerity in providing the resources for education; increasing centralization, moving decision-making away from the school or locality; the use of standardized testing as a method of control and of education; and forms of privatization, both as competition to and within the public system. Bocking particularly notes the role of international organizations in the production of common policies, including the OECD and its PISA exam.

Countervailing forces to these neoliberal directions are provided by some segments of teacher unions, although dominant elements of teacher unions in New York and Mexico City have been sometime allies in the imposition of neoliberal policies. Those opposing neoliberal directions have found common cause and mutual support in the Tri-national Coalition in Defense of Public Education, as well as other networks of teacher unions in the Americas, such as the IDEA Network/Red-SEPA.

In each of the case studies of three major urban education systems, Bocking provides context through recounting the history of developments in education policy over the past three decades. He then draws on interviews he conducted with classroom teachers that explore the restriction of professional autonomy, as well as views of how their unions have or have not supported their struggles for autonomy. Bocking's report on Toronto also draws on his personal experience as a supply (substitute) teacher and local union activist and officer.

The section on Mexico is of particular value in providing background on the development and struggles against neoliberal education policies, information not widely accessible in English. These struggles have been led by the Coordinadora Nacional de Trabajadores de la Educación (CNTE), a dissident section of the Sindicato Nacional de Trabajadores de la Educación (SNTE), the national union of teachers. The SNTE has generally played a role in support of government imposition of neoliberal policies, or, at least, complicit compliance. The limitations of the CNTE opposition group as an effective force within the union nationally include it being the dominant force in the union only in the southern states with significant indigenous populations. Struggles against neoliberal education policies have an anti-colonial aspect, as well as an autonomy element, that is stronger in those states, including Chiapas, Oaxaca and Michaocan.

Initially, neoliberal policies in Mexico championed decentralization, moving state responsibility to the school level as a way of forcing local communities and parents to cover more of the cost of education. However, this also opened some spaces for opposition to successfully negotiate with state governments to adopt policies different from those desired by the national government. But centralized government policy was re-established, with the direct support of the SNTE president, Esther Elba Gordillo, a corrupt and abusive union leader. A newly elected Mexican president turned on Gordillo, jailing her for corruption, and then attempted to impose new discipline measures through ongoing testing of teachers. Widespread teacher opposition, beyond the traditional oppositional sections of the union, forced the government to back down on testing, but successfully maintained other elements of neoliberal centralized control.

Based on his interviews with teachers in Mexico City, Bocking identifies why organized opposition to the neoliberal policies failed to develop there, particularly in the secondary union, which is organized separately from elementary teachers. Some of the limitations are structural because education in Mexico City has been under the direct control of the national education ministry, rather than the responsibility of Mexico City, which has had a centre-left government that might be more amenable to challenging the national policies. In addition, secondary teachers in Mexico City are precarious workers, only a small minority having full time teaching jobs in one school. Most work part time in multiple schools on shifts, or even work at separate jobs outside of teaching. This limits their time and ability for professional autonomy, as well as the conditions for successful organizing of union campaigns.

Some of the same themes arise in Bocking's look at secondary schools in New York. Although not precarious in the same way as in Mexico City, school-based budgeting and strong control by principals, along with restructuring into small secondary schools within a school, have led to inexperienced,

Secondary teachers in Mexico City are precarious workers, only a small minority having full time teaching jobs in one school. Most work part time in multiple schools on shifts, or even work at separate jobs outside of teaching. This limits their time and ability for professional autonomy, as well as the conditions for successful organizing of union campaigns.

The imposition by the state government of standardized testing and "value added" evaluation of teachers, along with the lack of stability in the faculty of the school, present major challenges to professional autonomy.

less expensive teachers filling many of the positions. School choice policies have produced more inequity as some schools can choose their students and others must take whoever is left. The imposition by the state government of standardized testing and "value added" evaluation of teachers, along with the lack of stability in the faculty of the school, present major challenges to professional autonomy.

The United Federation of Teachers (UFT) has been ineffective in opposing the neoliberal policies and have been challenged, unsuccessfully, by the Movement of Rank and File Educators (MORE), an opposition caucus within the union. The union has supported some school district policies, such as breaking the large secondary schools into smaller schools, mistakenly thinking that teachers would be able to have more influence on school policies. They have also been limited by structural issues similar to those in Mexico City. The direct relationship of the union is with the city in collective bargaining, but many of the neoliberal policies are imposed by the state government that can overrule any local decisions. The union puts its focus on lobbying the government, rather than, as MORE proposes, organizing collective action by teachers.

For his Toronto study, Bocking gives the history of the changing shape of neoliberal policies in Ontario that alternate between what might be called a hard, authoritarian neoliberalism and one that is softer and more reflective, but with similar impact. Both have common elements of varying degrees of austerity and centralization of decision-making toward the provincial and away from the local and the use of standardized testing to limit professional autonomy. He notes "staggering volumes of new policy" and increasing time taken up by administrators and teachers to document responses to the policy. The centralization of decisions has presented difficulties for the unions in Ontario to negotiate provisions that support professional autonomy. Also, Ontario has multiple education unions, presenting difficulties with finding unity in challenging government in bargaining.

A common element in all three systems is a changing relationship between school principals and teachers. As control is centralized, administrators are increasingly expected to be the enforcers of government direction on teachers. Principals were removed from membership in the unions with teachers in all these cases, some more recently than others. They become increasingly the agents of policy rather than collegial participants in a collective professional autonomy.

Bocking ends with a challenge to teacher unions. As control of education is increasingly centralized by governments, the union's focus inevitably shifts to seeking influence at that level, moving away from the local and the classroom. Whatever other successes they may have centrally, protecting professional autonomy has not been among them. His case studies give a sense of the reasons: sometimes compliance or even complicity in support of neoliberal proposals, other times a lack of focus or of unity on what to oppose and how best to do it. Bocking suggests that "a greater emphasis by teachers' unions on analyzing and advocating the elements of good teaching could bring the spacial centre of gravity within the union back to the school site and the classroom." And that could build the confidence and the resolve among teachers to maintain their professional autonomy against the reframing of public education as a neoliberal industry.

Larry Kuehn retired as the Director of Research at the British Columbia Teachers' Federation (BCTF). He was responsible for the BCTF International Solidarity Program and was one of the founders of the Tri-national Coalition in Defense of Public Education.

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