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Are They Safe? Are They Fed? Reimagining Inclusion in Schooling During a Pandemic

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This paper, using the method of currere, offers a rendering of the relationship between technology, inclusion, and social justice within education amid a walking through of Roy's Pandemic as a Portal metaphor. Educators are sitting in a critical moment to which pedagogic approaches can shift from educators responded to students assumed needs towards students expressed needs as we are seeing happening during the global pandemic.

Keywords: COVID-19, Inclusion, Technology, Equity

Introduction

On March 15th, 2020, public schools and post-secondary institutions in Alberta physically closed due to the COVID-19 virus, moving all instruction online. A similar wave spread across Canada, and the United States and other countries around the world after the World Health Organization declared COVID-19 a global pandemic. I had just finished teaching a pre-service teacher undergrad course. While attendance typically dips towards the end, on the final day, there were only a handful of students – one brought sanitizer and cleaned all the desks. While there were few, I was able to finish, complete our semester with human interactions and my ability to have this human finale was not a collective experience. The human became confined for safety with a digital lifeline.



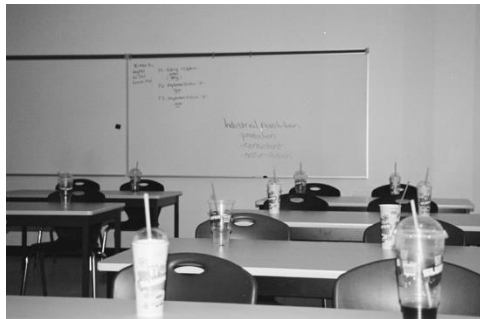
Education and Technology

In my teacher education program, technology was just beginning to infiltrate into schooling. My course on technology in education included learning about designing a web page, using Microsoft™ Excel, and something else I cannot recall. Since that time, technology and education have become so integrated it is hard to discern where one begins and the other ends. The capitalist onslaught of technocrats finding a new consumer swelled. Microsoft™, Apple™, and Google™ are but three of the giants that supported the integration; thus, when the pandemic confined the human, teachers were prepared. According to a 2016 Organization for Economic

Cooperation and Development (OECD) report, access to technology soared between 2003 and 2012, providing new and innovative approaches to pedagogy and job futures for students. The report stated that 72% of students use a device at school, and 93% use computers at home, primarily for internet access to school work and assignments. Thus, technology offers a potential solution to fears of students not learning in a regular school environment, and this movement implies stronger collaboration between the school and the home.

The Portal Opens

Theoretically, educators and students have prepared for this transition; however, the relationship between theory and practice is an “alienated” one (Pinar & Grumet, 1983). What is missing from the transition from the human to technology are forms of equity and care that go silenced. Schools are not only institutions of learning, but provide needed access to basic needs, including food, shelter, and a human connection. Soon after the pandemic-required transition to online education, the heightened demands for more equity in our classrooms became a focus. The alienation of those whose lives do not align with a place of privilege became delegated even more to the margins. The Alberta Teachers’ Association (ATA) completed a survey focused on the impacts of COVID-19 on educators (2020). Teachers report that they are affected significantly by the trauma that students are feeling. In addition, 63% of teachers detail strong feelings of isolation, 50% have concerns for their own mental health, and only 43% feel the same



emotional connection to their students with the move online. Teachers reported concern for their student's basic needs (41%), mental health (40%), isolation (36%) and home life (30%). One teacher responded to the survey regarding the welfare of their students, asking, "Are they safe? Are they fed?" (p. 13).

From a place of privilege, access opened to dialogues with scholars across the world. Arundhati Roy (2020) asked: "And even while the virus proliferates, who could not be thrilled by the swell of birdsong in cities, peacocks dancing at traffic crossings and the silence in the skies?" (np). She also puts a magnifying glass on the halt of capitalism amid the pandemic as the “mighty kneel and brought the world to a halt like nothing else could” (np). She challenged us to consider the pandemic as a portal to which we can begin to imagine new possibilities:

We can choose to walk through it, dragging the carcasses of our prejudice and hatred, our avarice, data banks and dead ideas, our dead rivers and smoky skies behind us. Or we can walk through lightly, with little luggage, ready to imagine another world. And ready to fight for it (np).

Carcasses Left Behind?

As the human becomes more obsolete in our classrooms, the question becomes: who carries little luggage and who remains inculcated by our prejudices? With a quick pivot, the K-12 education system in Alberta moved into the homes and lives of students and teachers. While our Mother Earth breathed deeply, many educators held their breath with worry for their students. *Are they safe? Are they fed?* are questions reverberating loudly across the province, and yet, these questions may not have been so common until we lost connection with the human as hooks

(2003) points out standard pedagogic practices are the focus of educator's attention, not necessarily the student. With a forced turn towards the unknown, many educators find themselves decentered and concentrated on learning rather than delivering curricular outcomes. The hidden curriculum hides no more. The inequities within K-12 schools, while acknowledged, have become more imperative to be addressed. *Are they safe? Are they fed?*

Dead ideas surrounding a neoliberal discourse within education need to be carcasses we leave behind. As Connell (2013) states, "neoliberalism seeks to make existing markets wider, and to create new markets where they did not exist before" (p. 100) and within education, this aligns with the infusion of technology, and the technocrats hold on how schooling ought to be. However, as seen within schooling, the injection of technology revealed yet another divide between privilege and those who survive in the margins. Access is problematic for students living in remote communities, including Indigenous Peoples, exponentially cutting off more opportunities during a pandemic. The opportunities that technocrats and other neoliberal companies provide to students in school are now having to push against the mighty kneel capitalism faces during an epidemic and economic crisis. However, disparities remain and are magnified as educators are no longer perpetuating the status quo (hooks, 2003) but instead asking: *Are they safe? Are they fed?*

Inclusive Carcasses

Within our pre-portal classrooms, students who were not safe or fed expressed their needs, but may not have been heard. Educators needed to discern between students' assumed needs and their expressed needs; at times, these would conflict and present as discipline issues (Noddings, 2012). Assumed needs are what form the explicit curricula expectations in schools and arise not directly from other people's assumptions of what students need at this given moment. The explicit curricula are designed by people in positions of power and



based on economic projections, such as moving towards more technology in schools. There is an assumption that our students need to learn how to live in a digital age to survive. However, for many of our students, survival is dependent on food, shelter, and love – not learning how to code or upload. When students express their individual needs, they communicate to us in ways that we first may not understand. When these needs are beyond the scope and the outcomes of explicit curricula, as Noddings (2005) states, "[o]verwhelming needs cannot be met by the usual processes of schooling" (p. 153). However, behaviour problems, disrespect of authority, and refusal to do work easily fit into regular school processes. When students do not have words, they use their bodies and emotions to tell us what they need. Were we listening? Are we listening now?

With the shift away from human interactions, educators now focus on expressed needs rather than assumed needs. As Noddings (2012) states, "the expressed need – of the other moves us" (p. 773) and this movement, this disruption arose as we unknowingly moved through a portal to another side, an empathic, compassionate, and socially just side of what it means to be an educator. Engaging in caring ethics in teaching lies "*underneath* all we do as teachers" (p. 777). With the removal of standardized notions of moving along the grade levelled pathways, caring ethics can no longer remain dormant but move to the forefront. During the pandemic, educators need to focus their interactions with students on social emotional needs and building self-esteem

rather than on meeting expectations of excellence through grit and determination. However, while educators are focusing on safety and food, segregation has become even more deeply entrenched.

The OECD (2003) states that when designing learning opportunities for students, considerations for student "disabilities, difficulties, and disadvantages in a way that respects and protects these groups' rights" (p. 10) are required. However, within the classroom, the relationship between theory and practice is alienated. Often, inclusion means access to learning rather than responding to students' expressed needs, such as hunger pains or microaggressions or socio-cultural barriers that limit the reality of an inclusive classroom. The various 'gaps' between racialized individuals and those whose identity dominates in the curriculum demonstrate that classrooms are not inclusive; however, there remains a hidden experience as many educators cannot see these disparities within the neoliberal classroom. Incarceration rates for Indigenous Peoples in Canada are comparable with graduation rates from high school, with 35% of Indigenous youth incarcerated (Department of Justice, 2019), while only 44% of Indigenous youth in Alberta finish high school on time (Howell, 2015). The normalization of these gaps remains; learning and schooling are structured to support a dominant identity while "Others" are pushed out or forced to conform and their expressed needs remain misrecognized. However, the portal has highlighted how inclusion is an alienated reality, and we need to leave that carcass behind.



Pack an Inclusive Carry-On

Are they safe? Are they fed? These expressed needs are questions that ought to move educators to rethink and reconsider the perceived benefits of technology in education as well as inclusion. Inclusion needs to shift focus from diverse learning abilities towards different learning *needs*. Are racialized individuals safe? Are all students fed with a healthy diet? As we walk through the pandemic portal, awareness shines on the need for human connections between teachers and students, not another interface or learning management system. As well, the foundation of inequities to which schools stand need to crumble, and this can begin by keeping the focus on students' expressed needs and aligning theory and practice in our classrooms. As the world pauses, as Mother Earth exhales – educators are in a critical moment of reimagining what learning and inclusion can become.

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