Education, COVID-19, and the Canadian context: Meeting the needs of vulnerable students.

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The COVID-19 pandemic is an experience few have escaped globally. However, the impacts have been felt differently by individuals, groups, and communities due to differing local and national public health guidelines, education policies, and other approaches intended to minimize the spread of the virus. In Canada, elementary and secondary schooling is a provincial responsibility. This means that although all levels of schooling were disrupted during the pandemic, policies and practices varied considerably across the country. Most provinces closed schools and childcare centres by mid-March 2020 and remained closed for the rest of the school year (until June 30, 2020). Closures continued intermittently during the 2020-21 school year as waves of infection moved students and teachers back and forth between in-person and remote learning (Vaillancourt et al., 2021). In some parts of Canada (such as Ontario), schools were closed for more than 31 weeks, which, according to UNESCO data, is comparable with closures in Romania, Italy, Ethiopia, Afghanistan and Cambodia (Subramanian, 2021).

Before COVID-19, less than 1.5% of Canadian children were home-schooled. With school closures during the pandemic, 5.7 million Canadian children and youth found themselves experiencing at least several weeks of remote and online instruction at home (Statistics Canada, 2021). In some jurisdictions, students received fully remote delivery due to school closures or by parent choice. Others experienced blended online models combining online and face-to-face learning. Weekly instructional hours of contact between teachers and students were reduced dramatically, ranging from one to twelve hours for students up to Grade nine and two to three hours for students in Grades ten to twelve (Gorbet et al., 2020). A national survey of 18,000 teachers in 2020 reported that teachers were not able to maintain regular contact with their students and were concerned about "getting students what they need to be successful with online instruction" (Alberta Teachers Association, 2020, p. 16). Many expressed concerns about the "unintended consequences" school closures would have on "the provision of physical and mental health services, food, safety, security, and support" (p. 73).

The COVID-19 pandemic in Canada has served as an "x-ray" that has exposed a series of "already existing" inequities and systemic barriers within school systems and society at large, including "poverty and economic inequality, hunger and homelessness, racial and ethnic bias, unequal access to high-speed internet and computers, and inadequate resources for those most in need" (Westheimer & Hagerman, 2021, p. 115).

The ongoing impact of COVID -19 on Canada's most vulnerable populations

In Canada, a long history of racism and colonial violence against racialized and Indigenous groups "has left many communities disproportionately unprepared for the COVID-19 global pandemic" (Galloway, Bowra, Butsang & Mashford-Pringle, 2020). The Chief Public Health Officer of

Canada, Theresa Tam, has asserted that COVID-19 has not affected people in Canada equally (Public Health Agency of Canada, 2020). Canadian health care stakeholders have identified racism as a social determinant of health and a public health emergency (Canadian Public Health Association, 2021). In Canada, "[r]acialized groups overrepresented in reported COVID-19 cases include Arab, Middle Eastern or West Asian people, Black people, South American people, South Asian or Indo-Caribbean people and Southeast Asian people" (Public Health Agency of Canada, 2020).

As Canadian scholar Carl James reports, the pandemic has "exacerbated the racial injustice with which racialized and Indigenous youth must contend" (2020, p. 1). For example, racist incidents against Asian-appearing individuals have increased during the pandemic, influenced by stigma related to the virus's origins in the Wuhan province of China (Heidinger & Cotter, 2021). Immigrants and groups designated as 'visible minorities' comprise a larger proportion of front-line workers, placing them at greater risk (Statistics Canada, 2020).

Although many of these inequities are not new, the varied and inconsistent approaches to online learning, gaps in student supports, unequal distribution of school closures, and general pandemic-related challenges has also disproportionately affected those already vulnerable, including low-income families, migrants, people with disabilities, and racialized and Indigenous groups (Ciuffitelli-Parker & Conversano, 2021). For example, the move to online learning has not been equally experienced by all students. As Farhadi (2019) contends, despite assumptions that online learning creates equal opportunities, "it operates as an extension of an inherently disadvantageous system" premised on a "meritocratic political philosophy" in which course content is delivered "as one-size fits-all across a diverse range of learners" (p. 187). The move to online, which has been unevenly implemented, has meant that "[m]any children and youth have experienced disengagement, chronic attendance problems, declines in academic achievement, and decreased credit attainment during the pandemic, with the impact far deeper for those already at-risk." (Whitley et al. 2021, p. 1693). Low-income students, second language learners, as well as those racialized or with disabilities like autism, may not possess the expected social and cultural capital, which means they must work harder to pick up on the subtleties, "nuances and slight delays (or nonsynchronous) expressions of teachers (and their peers if they show their faces on screen)" (James, 2020, p. 5). The impact of social isolation, loneliness and disconnection from peers has impacted not only academic achievement but also students' physical and mental health (Vaillancourt et al., 2021). As James (2020) explains, with these challenges it is "understandable why such students would be less engaged and counted among those most likely to be truant" (2020, p. 5).

In Canada, we are also finding that the shift to remote learning has limited student access to school-based health care services and has impacted the food security of many children and youth who had previously relied on subsidized meals in school. The long absences from school have also placed limitations on teachers' ability to detect and report child maltreatment and neglect (Vaillancourt et al, 2021; See also Baron, Goldstein & Wallace, 2020). In contexts where families could choose the mode of delivery (online or in person), families from different socioeconomic and racial backgrounds have largely opted for remote learning – but for widely different reasons and with vastly different effects. As Bascaramurty and Alphonso (2020) explain, privileged families are "opportunity hoarding" by "opting for distance education, hiring personal tutors and forming

private learning pods – decisions that are ostensibly made in the best interests of their children". In contrast, those in lower income communities are choosing remote learning "because they have elderly relatives living with them who are vulnerable to getting sick, they feel a heightened threat from COVID-19 because they are in areas with the highest infection rates and the buildings in which they live pose challenges to getting to school on time in a pandemic (Bascaramurty & Alphonso, 2020). This trend has exposed "cracks" already prevalent in the system.

Looking forward – Lessons from Canada

Despite being an OECD and a G7 country with a wealth of resources and a long history of relative stability, Srivastava et al. (2020) suggest that Canada was largely unprepared to handle the pandemic crisis. To blame are, in part, weak contingency plans and separate localized systems that did not effectively integrate ministries of education with ministries of health, labour or child welfare, which commonly collaborate in many lower income countries (Subramanian, 2021). As a result, "in a matter of months, Canada went from a mandatory, universal school system to a patchwork of many models" and "collapsed almost immediately" while other countries (e.g., Taiwan, Japan, Australia, and New Zealand) were able to retain much of their normal structure, only closing during severe outbreaks (Subramanian, 2021). As Bennett (2021) suggests, provinces made school closure decisions without any real knowledge of the impact closures would have on student learning and their well-being, noting that "policy makers missed the early warning signals of pandemic learning loss which have fallen unevenly on students from disadvantaged, racialized and marginalized communities".

Although there is not sufficient comparable data yet in Canada about the achievement gaps due to COVID-19, there are many things we can still learn. Under the province of Ontario's *Education Act*, the purpose of schooling is to "provide students with the opportunity to realize their potential". Educational approaches must work to promote student "achievement and well-being" (Gallagher-MacKay et al, 2021, p. 3. From what we are learning, there are significant benefits to treating schools as an "essential service", which would mean "keeping them open wherever circumstances allow" (Davies & Aurini, 2021). Some suggest it is important that schools be the last to close and the first to open, although such practices would require a strong commitment to safety practices and vaccination. Curriculum and instructional practices should be adapted to meet the needs of and support those who are most disadvantaged by the pandemic. For example, individualized or classroom-specific support to recognize different needs, and a recognition that some students will need much more time to catch up. Finally, research suggests that it will be important to focus not just on "learning loss" or "achievement gaps". Whitley et al (2021, p. 1695) argue that an overemphasis on learning loss can be misleading because it assumes that "learning is equated solely with academic achievement" and does not value additional skills or knowledge students may have developed outside the classroom. Rather, "[w]hat determines whether learning or academic achievement is lost is determined by how well vulnerable students are supported and resourced during and following the pandemic" (Whitley et al, 2021, p. 1696). If we are to address deeper inequities that were embedded in schooling systems long before COVID-19, then we must also consider how students are motivated, how they engage, and how they are included in schools and focus on our curricula and approaches in ways that keep issues of inequity at the forefront.

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