

**COVID-19:
Musings of a new teacher
navigating a world unknown, learning in uncertainty,
and trusting in the capability of children to do the same**

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As a fresh graduate of University of New Brunswick's Bachelor of Education Degree (B.Ed.) Program, I have spent the past year ruminating on how to hone my craft. I learned many educational theories, experimented in their application, and studied the classrooms in which I participated as a facilitator of learning, and also as a student. Often, they were one and the same.

In March 2020, the whole world shifted. The scale of the COVID-19 pandemic placed everyone in a situation of uncertainty. There were no pre-existing protocols in place for what was happening; plans for the future were simply null and void. When it came to education and schools, the only thing that was guaranteed was that it would need to change.

As an adult entering into a new profession, this was a lot to process. I wondered what it must feel like to navigate this overnight upheaval of societal constructs as a child.

The emergence COVID-19 happened during my final practicum placement at an elementary school in Rothesay, New Brunswick. During the brief period following March break before the school closures, teachers discussed what they knew or had heard about the virus, possible effects on the upcoming future, and whether or not to share their thoughts in the classroom.

So did the students. They talked about it whether we talked about it with them or not.

As we shifted into a new life reality the topic came up often about how much information we should share with children about serious, life-altering global events and issues such as the current pandemic.

Through my own reflection and discussion with peers and colleagues I came to the following opinions.

Discussing the pandemic offers a vast teaching opportunity that is immediately engaging.

Students are thinking and talking about COVID-19 anyway; what better way to learn? As a believer in emergent curriculum, I am of the opinion that the best way to teach children is to have a topic be relevant, real and responsive. Emergent curriculum includes children, teachers and environment in a process of co-construction (Jones & Nimmo, 1994, p. 67) whereby curriculum emerges based on the interests of the child (Kashin, 2007, p. 30). Authentic learning experiences are engaging and dynamic. We should not stifle the inquiry of young minds by

shielding our students from the truth. Encouraging them to incorporate current events into the classroom creates an environment where children can feel supported in their quest of meaning-making and validated in their self-expression.

Teaching a child to wash their hands properly but not teaching them why it is important is not as relatable or as effective as teaching them in response to something that is tangible and pertinent. Teaching theory with application allows for a more meaningful understanding by offering context. Discussing the pandemic with our students gives them opportunity to inquire about, and have agency over their learning. Although it can be scary to talk about real things it is worse to disembodied children from reality.

As teachers, it is our duty to give students the truth and tools to navigate the world in which they live. The truth is, the circumstances of life are ever evolving, and the current reality we all face requires constant evaluation of information; its sources, credibility and relevance. As such, one of the tools we must equip children with is literacy in the present world. By openly inviting students to participate in knowledge sharing, teachers can provide children with a real experience in gathering information, revising new information and examining sources of information with critical thought in order to determine validity.

For the most part our teaching occurs in a classroom setting; however, learning is not confined to within those walls.

During my practicum, I felt that I came to know a lot about my students' daily lives; who they were, and what was important both to and for them. I could see how easy it would be to become entranced in the idea that what happened in the classroom was of the utmost relevance to a child's learning. However, when I reflect upon my own childhood experiences and memories, I recognize that children's presence in our classrooms are transitory. They will be with us for just a brief window of time in which the majority of their learning is simply built upon foundations and building blocks that are addressed in the classroom. The rest of their education will be defined by their own experiences and the contributions of other teachers, mentors, and peers.

New Brunswick's curricular documents relating to *global competencies* directly confronts the fact that the future is uncertain. The document supports the inclusion of a skillset that defines a *future-ready learner* who is adaptable, with transferrable skills and learning attitudes. Social responsibility and critical analysis of interconnectivity are highlighted as part of global citizenship (New Brunswick Education, 2019). By discussing COVID-19 openly, we can help our students gain skills in locating resources for reliable information and identifying misinformation, while increasing their digital and media literacies. Teachers can demonstrate through example what critical thinking really looks like in a real-world setting, how to think critically, and why this is important. In our ever-changing world, these skills are applicable, transferrable, and desirable in people showing strong global citizenship qualities.

Practicing mindfulness during a global pandemic means proactively approaching social-emotional learning.

Strong emotional responses to crises such as fear of the unknown and anxiety surrounding uncertainty is normal and understandable, especially in children. As teachers, our students look to us for reassurance. Thus, we need to teach students the value of attending to our mental health, moderating our emotional responses and being aware of those of others, in order to promote wellness in the future generation. We often stress the value of mindfulness activities set apart from context, but it is important to apply mindfulness to everyday situations that students may encounter. To be mindful of the world we live in is to respond with intent. By directly addressing and validating students' emotional responses to COVID-19, teachers can help them navigate these responses with intent and confidence. In doing so, we model positive behaviours that lead to positive outcomes. During these changing and challenging times, classrooms should be safe spaces for students to emote. Teachers can offer care and guidance by modelling that it's okay to have feelings, talk about them, and respond to the world around us. We can discuss togetherness, self-care, and how to respond to others' emotional responses as well as our own. In this way, teachers demonstrate that social-emotional learning is just as important as academic instruction.

Additionally, valuing the concerns, emotions, and knowledge of our students is instrumental in shaping how they will treat the concerns, emotions and knowledge of others. As Kohn (1996) states, "Children are more likely to be respectful when important adults in their lives respect them. They are more likely to care about others if they know they are cared about" (p. 111). If we are to encourage collaborators who are able to listen, have empathetic responses and understand the values of others, we must model this through the real, uncertain, and often scary time of crises. During these times, we rely on each other for support, and are there to be supportive and helpful to others who may need it.

In the elementary years, teachers guide children through their formative development. How we address mental health and wellness during times of crisis will shape the way they view world issues and their actions in response in their future lives, possibly forever.

Open, critical discussion about real world events can foster and nurture a growth mindset.

I am a strong believer in *growth mindset* - that intelligence is malleable and improvable (Dweck, 2006), and that skills are something we acquire and improve upon through spending time with activities requiring such skills. I think it is important for our students to see us engage in the process of being lifelong learners. Watching us learn about COVID-19 as educators models a growth mindset approach to learning. The result of this is a ripple effect through time, in that students from an early age can see that the process of learning is dynamic, relevant and pervasive throughout our entire lives. Shielding students from topics that are challenging sets an example that a valid alternative to open discussion is to avoid discussing these issues entirely. Withholding information presents the possibility of children grappling with the idea that adults know everything, and then feeling daunted by the insurmountability of learning it all at once.

Having faith that our students will be contributing members of society is a self-fulfilling prophecy.

Throughout the B.Ed. Program, I learned a lot about teaching and learning, pedagogy and curriculum. In the process of organizing my thoughts into a cohesive expression of my own educational philosophy, I have come to the conclusion that fostering an assumption of competence as the underlying tone of a classroom should be the goal. Believing in the abilities of people is the primary building block for healthy classroom norms, safe spaces, and raising the whole child to value the strengths in themselves and their peers. The competence of children, and their roles as active members of society, are deserving of respect.

Children play a huge part in our communities and in our society as a whole; thus, it is important for them to understand their impact. They are capable of carrying communicable diseases such as the current coronavirus, understanding its implications on society, and helping to stop its spread. In actively distilling information from public health officials and presenting it in a competent, age-appropriate way, we can help them build skills toward the prevention of disease transmission. By coupling information with action, we allow children to have agency over their own actions and empower them to help prevent the spread of the virus. As teachers, we know that the students are teachers too. They are messengers of the community, who carry information and happily deliver it.

I believe strongly in a pedagogy of competence; having faith in the abilities of the students. As educators, I think it is our duty to share our knowledge with them, and that it would be patronizing to withhold the truth. Censoring children from current events implies that they are incapable of understanding or appropriately responding. They will be directly impacted by the preventative measures of COVID-19 so it is only fair to explain to them as best we can. One day, these students will be expected to navigate the world they live in, without us. Children need the chance to ask questions about what they watch, listen to, see, and read (Hobbs et al., 2013, p. 18). With the pandemic offering engaging opportunities to access information regarding current events, educators can guide students through the process of acquiring critical life skills in real-time, in real life. We can include them in our open, honest discussions so that they may develop skills needed to face unknown challenges of their future, and so that they may help us face those of today.

Every little one has a big role to play.

My little niece and I go for evening walks in our neighbourhood. She loves animals, and normally, she asks people with dogs if they are friendly, and whether it would be alright for her to pet them. Since the COVID-19 pandemic, she has not been allowed to do this. For a long time, she was also unable to go to the playground or visit her friends down the road. Everything she has learned in the short six years of her life has shifted. However, she has not been shielded from the truth of COVID-19 because she deserves to know, because it helps her to understand, and because knowing the facts will help her contribute to stopping the spread of the virus. She says as we are walking, "I can't wait until the virus is over, 'cause I just want to pet all the doggies again." She

knows the ways she can help make that happen, and that she is part of the solution. She waves at the dogs from across the road, and when she gets home, she counts to twenty while lathering her hands at the sink. She reasons through the changing circumstances surrounding the pandemic and accepts that adaptability is a fundamental skill in life. She has changed in the way she articulates the future, stating the possibility that her next birthday party might have to include her “family bubble only.” She is not upset by this idea now, and when the time comes, she will already have worked through the emotions surrounding the potential restrictions of guests or activities. I know she is better off for knowing the truth, and she is coming to understand that the rest of the world depends on her knowing it, too.

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