

Coronavirus school closures could widen inequities for our youngest students ^[1]

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EXCERPTS

COVID-19 may appear indiscriminate in how it infects people, but its greatest effect will be on the most vulnerable.

The coronavirus has uncovered myriad inequities within systems of education, from childrens' and families' access to resources, to the supportive and safe environments that are necessary for optimal learning. Inequities are exponentially greater in times of crisis.

In Canada, more than 2.3 million primary-age children remain at home. Challenges of inequity were immediately apparent as public school authorities began responding.

Privileged families with stable home environments will find themselves able to navigate and circumvent around school closures and find and use alternate and various learning resources, while families facing inequities will be most impacted by these challenges.

For the youngest children in our schools, the cumulative effects of inequities are particularly concerning. The interruption to their learning is happening precisely at a time when crucial developmental gains matter most, since these gains provide an important foundation for child well-being, competence, skills and maturation. This disruption, if left unaddressed, may shift childrens' developmental trajectories.

Remote learning

For our youngest learners, schools are responding in variable ways. In Ontario, for example, the province set out minimum requirements for students from kindergarten to Grade 3 at five hours per week with a focus on literacy and numeracy. The province has also more recently stressed the importance of mental health of children.

Young children learn through inquiry and self-directed, play-based community learning that is supported by responsive, stable, educator-child interactions.

Having teachers post resources online may be important to families with the capacities to engage with them, and using the internet to maintain relationships could be helpful in some cases. To meet the remote learning requirements stipulated by education authorities, some early childhood teachers are offering at-home learning strategies or minimal to frequent online meetings to deliver various curricula and support children.

But it's important for policy-makers and the public to understand something already very clear to early childhood educators and teachers: online delivery of education cannot substitute for in-person learning. Learning on a screen is not how young children learn the foundational and developmental skills they need.

How realistic it is for all families to follow the varied instruction that schools are offering is questionable, if not deeply problematic.

Inequities will be magnified

Public education serves as an equalizer in our society. But jurisdictional and national averages gloss over the evident inequities for Indigenous children, Black and racialized communities, children and families in shelters or government care, those with special needs and those living in poverty.

In the pandemic, the equalizing properties of education are now being eclipsed by child and parent ableism. This means that students and families who have internet and technology access, housing and food security and quiet and safe environments that are conducive to learning will be poised to benefit most from remote learning. Remote learning will further exacerbate the inequities that already exist.

This is not to say that teachers offering online time is not important. Educators are in a unique position of regular and almost daily contact with isolated families. Online time can support emotional and social well-being and referral to necessary services. For this reason, family check-ins should be a priority.

But let's acknowledge that there will be a lot of catching up to do when children return to school.

Family struggles

As learning transitioned online, many parents struggle with homeschooling due to limited technology and resources. Single-parent families, individuals with mental health challenges, those with children with special needs or with multiple children report feeling overwhelmed. In homes marred by family violence, the respite offered by school is gone.

Essential workers may not be home to support childrens' learning. Those who continue to work from home must do so with a balance of child care, education and their own job demands, with much of the weight put on women.

Social and emotional well-being

The social and emotional well-being of families, children and educators is critical. Maintaining responsive interactions and social relationships between educators, children and families will help support well-being.

Potential changes in policies by ministries responsible for children and education may be necessary as we transition back to in-person schooling. Changes in teaching approaches will be important prior to a COVID-19 vaccine to ensure physical distancing health guidelines are not inadvertently having a negative impact on children's learning and development.

School authorities and child-care operators must focus on professional learning of their educators focusing on supporting children as they transition back. Approaches used to support refugees in order to narrow learning gaps may be useful.

Flexibility is required. Policies may need to change in real time. Unions may be required to be nimble, allowing educators to meet the needs and challenges of children and their learning.

Focus on early childhood

School authorities, public health and government ministries responsible for children and education must collaborate in order to create inclusive, supportive and safe environments, especially during transitions.

Co-ordinated public health responses should include input from school authorities and early childhood experts who know best how children learn. Educators are skilled at maintaining classroom safety and hygiene without impeding childrens' development.

The enduring social and emotional impacts will likely be COVID-19's greatest legacy, compounding inequities and widening inequality. How we respond to these incalculable disruptions will determine their outcome. Social and emotional well-being, the foundations of learning and lifelong success should be top priorities.

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