Maintaining Equitable and Inclusive Classroom Communities Online During the COVID-19 Pandemic

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Abstract

This paper explores the ways in which face-to-face classroom communities were disrupted and/or transformed by the move to online platforms and the effect of this disruption on equitable access to a quality education. Quality education is defined as engaged pedagogy, where students learn to interact with other students and engage with ideas in a way that promotes their ability to be part of a community while still feeling free to disagree with, critique, and take care of each other. To examine the extent to which such communities were created when schooling migrated online during the pandemic, this paper examines online schooling communities in terms of sense of belonging, trust, shared purpose, and quality of interactions. The analysis of the experiences of 11 teachers in Ontario, Canada, whose face-to-face classes were moved to online formats, establishes that equity was one of the first casualties of the change, with the most vulnerable students facing disproportionate academic, psychological, and social consequences.

It is perhaps a truism that, in order for students to learn, teachers need to establish a rapport with them. Experienced teachers are also aware that developing relationships between students is equally important. Consequently, they deliberately try to create a community within the classroom and the school. These communities are based on trust developed over time spent together over the course of the school year. In the spring of 2020, these classroom communities were disrupted by school closures in many jurisdictions. This paper explores the ways in which face-to-face classroom communities were disrupted and/or transformed by the move to online platforms and the effect of this disruption on equitable access to a quality education.

Engaged Pedagogy as Quality Education

To use a word like “quality” requires some explanation, as there are various conceptions of what counts as “quality” in education. For the purposes of this paper, I will define it specifically as
engaged pedagogy. As described by bell hooks (1994), engaged pedagogy encourages civic self-awareness and agency both within the classroom and beyond. Within the classroom, students learn to interact with other students and engage with ideas in a way that promotes their ability to be part of a community while still feeling free to disagree with, critique, and take care of each other. Such an approach must be inclusive, flexible, and responsive to students’ needs, moods, and abilities. It is perhaps because of this that engaged pedagogy (described variously, for example, as “inclusive,” “teaching for social justice,” “critical,” etc.) is an approach that is often put forward as the best way to teach students who are marginalized either within society or within the school or classroom for reasons related to demographic categories, abilities, and/or circumstance. Thus, we have some authors arguing for particular content that will be more relevant to students’ lives (Barrett, 2013; Bempechat et al., 2019), others for approaches that contextualize learning in politics (Freire, 1970) or in the community (James, 2012), and still others advocating education that focuses on identities (McKnight, 2018; Miller, 2018; Waterman et al., 2018). To this, bell hooks (1994) adds treating lived experience as a legitimate subject for academic consideration. This is key. Education should not be an exercise in alienation from oneself, one’s home, or one’s community, not least because this added burden is a barrier to learning (Benner & Wang, 2014; Young et al., 2017). Indeed, a student who is marginalized within the school system for any of the reasons above is vulnerable academically, socially, and psychologically (Sims & Coley, 2019). Thus, through these inclusive practices, marginalization outside of the classroom is addressed through a nurturing community within the classroom. I assume that although it is possible to create community within a classroom without engaged pedagogy taking place, engaged pedagogy is not possible without community. Thus, as we consider what happened to classroom communities when school buildings closed and most migrated to online platforms, it is important to consider if engaged pedagogy is possible at a distance.

During the first wave of the COVID-19 pandemic in the spring of 2020, emergency distance learning was mandated for all students in Ontario, Canada, whether or not students already had the maturity, motivation, circumstances, and resources necessary to learn in this way. There was also an international health crisis that had adverse effects on mental health and family incomes. Therefore, given the uniqueness of the situation, my purpose here is not to comment on online learning per se. However, since most school districts opted for online learning during the pandemic closures, it makes sense to look at some of the literature on developing classroom communities online.

Creating Online Learning Communities

As noted, teachers recognize that creating community within their classes is important and, over time, develop skills to do so. However, the technical skills required of a teacher in the online environment may create situations where even experienced teachers are unable to translate that expertise to the online environment (Farmer & West, 2019; Kaser & Hauk, 2016). That said, researchers such as Kaser and Hauk (2016) describe good qualities for online teaching as quite similar to what is needed for face-to-face teaching—flexibility, focus on collaboration among students, real-life experiences as a source for examples, and rapport with students.

It is tempting to focus on efficient knowledge acquisition as the sole purpose of online learning. Described by Gert Biesta (2012) as the leamnification of schools, this approach can undermine or ignore the social aspects of learning. Yet we know that, online, the most powerful learning comes from students interacting with each other (Kaser & Hauk, 2016). Recognition of the importance of community in encouraging student engagement online means that, to some,
creating community is seen as the best approach to helping students to succeed (Drysdale et al., 2016; Rakes & Dunn, 2015; Rovai, 2002). Indeed, an oft-cited problem with online learning is the lack of community, and some researchers suggest that it is impossible to build relationships online (Farmer & West, 2019) or at least a very real challenge (Baturay, 2011). However, there are examples in the literature wherein it has been done successfully.

For instance, Drysdale et al. (2016) investigated the effects of creating mentor groups for an online high school. Using a model of community described by Alfred P. Rovai (2002), they found that, for the most part, the mentor groups provided a sense of community for students that was absent in their regular classes and that this in turn improved engagement and motivation with respect to academic achievement. This contradicts Farmer and West (2019) to some extent but also highlights that the teacher must be deliberate about creating community because it is unlikely to happen spontaneously (Baturay, 2011). It is an open question whether having already been a face-to-face community makes this easier or more difficult and what factors affect this. Still, if community is what is needed, a framework for evaluating the quality of the learning community is in order. Similar to Drysdale et al., I will be using Rovai’s framework to do so.

Rovai (2002) described the elements that need to be present in online schooling in order to create a sense of community: spirit (which I will call sense of belonging), trust, common expectations (which I will call shared purpose), and high-quality interaction. Sense of belonging refers to students feeling that they are amongst friends and enjoy spending time together. Further, there is a sense that it is safe not only to nurture each other but to challenge each other, too. Trust is a feeling that one can rely on other students in the class and be assured that classmates care about and would not lie to one. Trust creates feelings of safety so that students can express themselves freely. Shared purpose relates to a shared sense of what the class is trying to achieve academically. High quality interaction focuses on the nature of both student–student and student–teacher interactions being conducive to the above. Drysdale et al. (2016, p. 153) describe this as quality interactions which “fosters socio-emotional interaction” and “includes empathetic messages and self-disclosure.”

This model is consistent with what bell hooks described as her approach to teaching:

I might ask students to ponder what we want to make happen in the class, to name what we hope to know, what might be most useful. I ask them what standpoint is a personal experience. Then there are times when personal experience keeps us from reaching the mountaintop and so we let go because the weight of it is too heavy. (hooks, 1994, p. 92)

For teachers to feel free to ask their students what they want to accomplish and for students to reveal, in front of their peers, what aspects of themselves they bring to the endeavour, while still being open to critique, requires the sense of belonging, trust, and shared purpose that Rovai (2002) describes, developed over time through the quality interactions that Drysdale et al. (2016) describe.

Rovai (2002) states that a sense of community is indeed possible in online learning environments. The specific questions to examine here, then, are (1) What can Rovai’s model tell us about the efficacy of teachers’ efforts to maintain the community they had created face-to-face when schooling moved online? and (2) To what extent can this model provide insight into the degree to which equitable access to a quality education was a feature of online learning during the pandemic school closures?
Context

Ontario is the most populous province in Canada, with 2,056,058 students attending publicly funded schools in the 2019–2020 school year (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2021). Once school buildings were ordered closed on March 12, 2020, students first enjoyed a two-week extension of their March break. As of April 6, 2020, they were expected to engage in distance learning led by their teachers, and school boards made efforts to get devices and internet to those students who did not have either or both. One added complication was that the government also mandated that grades could not go down from where they stood on March 12, although they could be improved.

The Ministry of Education mandated reduced hours of instruction for each grade level, focusing on specific subjects:

- Kindergarten to Grade 3 — Students will complete five hours of work each week, focusing on literacy and math.
- Grades 4 to 6 — Five hours of work each week, focusing on literacy, math, science and social studies.
- Grades 7 to 8 — 10 hours of work each week, focusing on math, literacy, science and social studies.
- Grades 9 to 12 — Three hours of work per course each week for semestered students, or 1.5 hours per course each week for non-semestered students. (King, 2020)

Although there was some confusion as time went on about how many hours had to be spent in synchronous learning, the above stipulations remained the same. Additionally, in response to the continued exponential growth of COVID-19 cases, the length of time that schooling was to remain online was repeatedly extended, compromising long-term planning.

All of the above parameters meant that this emergency distance learning was distinct from teaching online courses in normal circumstances.

Methodology

The overarching aim of the larger exploratory study was to gain insight into teachers’ experiences and their perspectives about their students’ experiences. It involved a survey and semi-structured interviews. After ethical approval from the University was obtained, the survey was made available online from the end of May to mid-June 2020. The survey was designed to (1) identify good candidates for interviews and (2) provide context for the interviews in terms of teachers’ professional development, comfort with and attitude toward online pedagogy and digital technologies, and personal circumstances. I mention this survey here only to explain how the interviewees were recruited, keeping in mind that the focus of this paper is much narrower. Indeed, this was a large study with many emergent themes that, as is always the case with a large exploratory qualitative study, gave rise to many more questions about teachers’ experiences during the pandemic. For this short paper, however, I zoom in on one aspect of that experience that came to light from the findings—fostering community online while teaching marginalized students—and highlight the findings from a small group of teachers to do so. I do this because, although most of the teachers interviewed did not predominantly teach marginalized students, the degree to which this minority of students had equitable access to a quality education is a significant question to explore. Thus, in this short paper, my analysis spotlights particular teachers from the study.
Participants

Survey participants were 764 teachers in Ontario, Canada, who were teaching online or distance courses as a result of school closures. 300 of the survey respondents volunteered to be interviewed. From those, 50 were purposely sampled (Creswell, 2013) for interviews based on roughly matching proportions of teachers based on gender, age, experience, panel (elementary or secondary), and subject(s) taught. An effort was also made to include teachers in various geographical locations within Ontario (north, southwest, east, urban, suburban, rural, and the Golden Horseshoe, which is a densely populated area around Lake Ontario).

For this paper, I focus on 11 teachers from the larger group of interviewees because nine of them taught classes predominantly consisting of marginalized students (as defined in the introduction) and two provide counter examples where the marginalized students were in the minority in their classes. These latter two were chosen because community was a major theme in their interview data. Such an approach avoids losing the experiences of a minority (in this case, both the teachers who predominantly work with marginalized students and the marginalized students themselves) within a larger sample (Farinde-Wu & Fitchett, 2018) while emphasizing the uniqueness of that minority. These 11 teachers had very different personalities. Some were very talkative; others were more succinct. Some spoke in quick and animated styles; others spoke slowly and deliberately. They each brought different experiences to their choice of career and the schools and students in and with which they worked were varied. However, for nine of the teachers, most of the students they taught had disabilities, lived in poverty, were racialized, were English Language Learners, were adult learners (having never finished high school), or were otherwise identified as being at risk of dropping out of school. Some details about the 11 teachers and their contexts are in Table 1.

Data collection and analysis

The 35–75-minute semi-structured open-ended interviews were conducted via video conferencing (see Appendix A for questions). All interviews were fully transcribed. They were first analyzed thematically through a process of contextualization and recontextualization (Tesch, 1990). These themes were then considered using Rovai’s (2002) framework by asking the following: To what extent were teachers able to realize the four elements of community, and what were the implications for providing equitable access to a quality education?

This analysis considers teachers’ perceptions in the aggregate, using representative quotes from dominant themes. It is not meant to evaluate individual participants’ efforts, as I did not have access to their online environments to observe their teaching. Validity was established by (1) matching age, years of experience, geographic location, and gender identity in similar proportions to the survey sample when choosing interviewees, (2) interviewing the teachers with the same basic questions, and (3) member checking—which occurred at the end of each interview.
### Table 1: Participants

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pseudonym</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Experience (years)</th>
<th>Panel</th>
<th>Subject Taught During School Closures</th>
<th>Context*</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Elise</td>
<td>65+</td>
<td>11 or more</td>
<td>High school</td>
<td>English as a Second Language (ESL) – refugees</td>
<td>urban, lower SES**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rhea</td>
<td>45–54</td>
<td>11 or more</td>
<td>High school</td>
<td>Vocal music</td>
<td>urban, full range SES</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Erin</td>
<td>35–44</td>
<td>11 or more</td>
<td>Elementary school</td>
<td>SERT***</td>
<td>small town, full range SES</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Marley</td>
<td>45–54</td>
<td>11 or more</td>
<td>Elementary school</td>
<td>Homeroom</td>
<td>urban, middle SES</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gordon</td>
<td>65+</td>
<td>11 or more</td>
<td>High school</td>
<td>Social sciences</td>
<td>urban, full range SES</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kendra</td>
<td>35–44</td>
<td>6–10</td>
<td>Elementary school</td>
<td>Special education – autistic students</td>
<td>suburban, full range SES</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mo</td>
<td>45–54</td>
<td>11 or more</td>
<td>High school</td>
<td>Alternative education program</td>
<td>urban, lower SES</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>David</td>
<td>45–54</td>
<td>11 or more</td>
<td>Elementary school</td>
<td>Homeroom</td>
<td>urban, lower SES</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Blake</td>
<td>25–34</td>
<td>6–10</td>
<td>High school</td>
<td>SERT</td>
<td>small town, lower SES</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rowntree</td>
<td>35–44</td>
<td>11 or more</td>
<td>Elementary school</td>
<td>Full Day Kindergarten (FDK)</td>
<td>suburban, lower SES</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lexie</td>
<td>25–34</td>
<td>6–10</td>
<td>Middle school</td>
<td>French Immersion</td>
<td>suburban, full range SES</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Glenda</td>
<td>65+</td>
<td>11 or more</td>
<td>Elementary school</td>
<td>Homeroom</td>
<td>suburban, lower SES</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*The terms used originate from the participants.

**SES = socioeconomic status

***SERT = Special Education Resource Teacher

### Findings

The move to emergency distance learning required teachers to rethink, review, and revise their approaches to teaching. Pre-pandemic, all of the 11 teachers felt comfortable with online technologies, using them for administrative purposes or to help students keep themselves organized. Several had already set up online platforms for students to track their homework (although only a few used them for grading or assignment submissions).

Once the Ministry of Education announced that school would be moved to online formats, school boards offered professional development modules on online teaching, and teachers worked together to divide up the work and support each other. All of the teachers highlighted here had help from colleagues. For instance, Mo had been an innovator in this area in the past, and the SERTs made themselves available to the teachers of the students with whom they worked. Kendra and Mo were the only two who had no one else teaching their courses with whom to share the load but both were comfortable using the school boards’ resources to develop their skills.
All of the teachers featured here reported that relationships within their classroom communities were disrupted by the move from face-to-face to online. However, each tried to compensate for the disruption in their own way.

**Sense of belonging**

Drysdale et al. (2016) break down sense of belonging into four components: recognition of membership in community, feelings of friendship, enjoyment of time together, and ability to challenge and nurture each other. The participants used various methods to maintain sense of belonging online. For example, Elise was aware that her students needed consistency; therefore, she arranged to meet with students daily and synchronously (resulting in many more hours of instruction than were mandated):

> I’m old enough to break the rules. And so, I did what I wasn’t supposed to do and was able to connect with my students both in terms of how to get them online and the fact that I met with them every day at a certain time and Fridays at a certain time. We changed that [Friday] time because the boys had to pray at that time. (Elise, high school ESL)

By adjusting the class schedule to accommodate the students’ religious practice, rather than simply excusing the students who did Friday prayers from class, Elise was sending a strong message of inclusion where it was not just the case that she was accommodating them but that all students were accommodating each other. Still, although many of the students chose to attend these daily classes, most were unwilling to turn on their cameras. Elise tried to draw students out and encourage them to show their faces but was largely unsuccessful in that regard.

Rhea is the first of two counterexamples. She team-taught a group of students out of whom a minority would be considered marginalized. Rhea used various techniques to run her classes but realized that they were losing the sense of connection they had had before the school building closed:

> So, we decided we would have an open mic live. So, a kid with guitar plays through the song they wrote, and we hosted it all together for an hour and kids would write in the chat and they’d say, “Oh, you're amazing! Oh, I love your song.” … And at the end of the person’s performance, we would read through the chat comments so they could hear all the nice things that people were saying. We set parameters: “This is a place for community to come together and share. This is not a place for you to give your constructive criticism about how to improve.” And it was really fun. And some of the teachers performed, too, which was really great and it felt like, here’s an opportunity for a wider part of the school to come together…. And then at the end of the year that happened again. (Rhea, high school vocal music)

In this instance, a sense of community was definitely fostered, yet any student who had a spotty internet connection would not have been able to participate fully. Indeed, Rhea mentioned that some of her students never logged on to the online platform because they did not have access to the internet. Thus, Rhea celebrated the community that she was able to maintain, but she admitted that some of her students did not have the means to be part of it.

Similarly, Erin, whose practice had been based on connecting with individual students and their teachers, found that once everything went online, not all of her students managed to log on, and continuity was lost:
I and my colleagues [are] very worried about what will happen in the fall for those kids, whether they’re moving from kindergarten to Grade 1 or even just between grades between the primary to the junior division. I didn’t get a lot of opportunities to have face-to-face interaction or even speak with those kids. They weren’t able to get on the online meetings and so I do feel it’s kind of out of sight, out of mind [for the kids]. And I think some will be excited when we do get face-to-face again. But I think there’s going to be a lot of work to do to try and get back to where we left off. (Erin, elementary SERT)

Thus, from Erin’s point of view, there was a deterioration of students’ sense of belonging as students slowly lost their sense of connection over time. She could not be sure why that was happening, however, because if a student did not log on to the online platform or if the parents did not respond to email or phone queries, she had no information on which to act. This was a common refrain with teachers of younger students. In class, teachers had direct access to their students, but online, not only were they no longer face-to-face but all interactions were mediated (or not) through parents. One participant, Marley, said that even when they met synchronously, the entire dynamic changed:

They acted as if when parents come in and the child stands beside them all shy. That’s how they acted. [And I ask them] “I know you. What are you doing?” (Marley, elementary homeroom)

Sense of belonging was an aspect of community that participants seemed to naturally choose to foster, as they most likely did in their face-to-face classrooms; however, the online environment created a barrier between them and their students and between individual students that was challenging to overcome. Further, because of this barrier, teachers could not easily adjust their approach to help their students to engage with the class. And yet, similar to Dyrsdale et al.’s (2016) findings, those students who did go online, and on camera, could have a sense of the belonging Rovai (2002) describes if their teachers created spaces solely for community.

Trust

If a person can create in their classroom a structure of trust and inside the structure is the warmth of loving each other, then people will take risks. And the kids who felt the most protected, the most comfortable, were the ones that stayed mostly. (Gordon, high school social sciences)

As Gordon describes, trust was an aspect of community that participants seem to have assumed they had before school buildings were shut down. He, too, taught a mixed group of students, with the marginalized being the minority. The above quote was his response when asked why he thought a small number of his students had immediately disappeared once teaching migrated online. The corollary of his assessment of the situation is essentially that if students were marginalized before the school buildings closed, they were also marginalized during the closures. Gordon notes that trust is essential for community; however, the online environment undermined this in many ways. The components of trust described by Rovai (2002) include a student feeling that they can confide in others, that their colleagues and teachers will not lie to them, and that classmates and their teacher have good intentions towards them. In short, trust creates a feeling of safety. Trust is crucial with marginalized students who, by definition, have been shunted aside in some way by their classmates, their school, the school system, or society.
Kendra teaches a small group of students with autism in an elementary school, with ages ranging from 3 to 8. For her, trust was fundamental to making progress with them, socially or academically. However, this trust was fragile:

We’ve worked so hard to establish and build in that level of trust…. We’re dealing with non-neurotypical kids. That trust for them is huge. It's make-or-break in a special education classroom. If they don’t trust you and you don’t have that relationship with them, you can program all you want. It doesn’t mean that you’re gonna get through to them. And for me, I have a couple of students that we’ve worked so hard over the years because a lot of these kids I’ve had for like two and three years, like they’ve been with me for a while. And my biggest worry was that they were all going to think that I had abandoned them. (Kendra, elementary, SERT)

In this case, Kendra believed no real learning could happen in the absence of a sense of trust, but because of the nature of students’ conditions and their ages, maintaining trust at a distance was unlikely. For Mo, who teaches in an alternative program with students at risk of dropping out of school, before schooling migrated online, trust motivated his students to persevere and also to come to him when they needed help:

I work with them on everything [including] mental health issues if they’re having trouble at home. If they’re having trouble with the government, I help them fill out the forms. I help them get health cards…. And so they’re comfortable with me. They need help with those things and also to get help they need but if they’re not engaging over the phone, my hands are tied. There’s nothing I can do. So, I found that it was funny because two of the kids [with the] worst attendance, but really nice kids, said, “You know, I never thought I’d say this, sir, but I really miss your class. I can’t wait until we’re back in class again.” So, that connection with them was really severed pretty hard. And for a lot of them, [they couldn’t connect online] at all. (Mo, high school alternative program)

For Mo’s students, it was difficult for them to engage with him. While the drop in participation was consistent with what was reported in most of the interviews, it was significant that these students were already in a precarious position. Their connection to school was mainly through the community Mo had created in this alternative program. But they were not able to maintain the connection and were thus even less likely to graduate.

The pandemic also created a situation where essential and/or frontline workers were put at higher risk of infection. This impacted their children. David teaches in an elementary school in a lower income neighbourhood:

One of my boys, his mom worked in a long-term care facility. And she worked a night shift and it’s just the two of them living at home. And so he altered his schedule so that when she was at work at night, he was up all night. And when she came home, she had what was her equivalent of supper, he joined her and then they would go to their rooms to go to sleep at the same time. So, they were on the same schedule. But then there was an outbreak at one of the homes. And so this kid is up all night long with nobody to talk to, worried that his mom is going to get the virus…. So, he’s like, “Is my mom going to die?” and, “Am I going to be left alone? What's going to happen?” (David, elementary homeroom)

The above makes clear the ways in which face-to-face classroom experiences can mitigate the effects of a student’s home life. This student experienced isolation in ways that he simply would not have were it not for the school buildings being closed.
In each of the examples above, we can see that teachers were tasked with protecting students’ confidence in their teachers’ care and concern, but there was very little mention of trust between students from any of the interviewees. This sense of mutual trust and concern amongst students appears to have been absent.

**Shared purpose**

According to Rovai (2002), shared purpose with respect to learning includes having a shared understanding of the value of what is being learned and an explicit understanding of academic goals. All of the students are there, ostensibly, to learn something. However, common beliefs about the value of that learning could not be taken for granted.

Elise told a story about one of her students who did not wish to show herself on camera even when she was in a one-on-one session:

One of the students was a student who was an only child and it was the mother and the daughter only in that family…. And at first when I was teaching the students online, she and her mother would both come on and the mother would help her…. And then near the end of the school year, I was teaching them one day and I could hear that there were other people there. And so I asked the student, “Oh, does your mother have friends there?” And so she puts on her camera so that I can see. And there are three adult women and their small children and the mother and my student. And they’re all learning English from me at the same time. They’re all there answering the question for her, which actually wasn’t so helpful for her because she didn’t learn as much as she might. (Elise, high school ESL).

This was a rare anecdote relating to the larger community. Clearly this student’s community valued what she was learning in school (how to speak English) and wanted to take advantage of the opportunity, too (perhaps to the student’s detriment). In this case, the classroom closures allowed the community to participate in a way they could not have done otherwise. Yet this did nothing to encourage this student to interact with her classmates.

Sometimes, however, the community recognized schooling as purely transactional—to get the credential. For example, Blake taught in a small working-class town where most students did not go on to attend postsecondary institutions:

As long as that student had an OK grade at their midterm mark … And unless they’re going to a post-secondary institution next year where they felt that they needed that learning in order to continue moving on … And I can go and work all day and get money or I could potentially go online, raise my mark up … So I had a lot of students tell me the truth and say, “What’s the point of me coming back when I have all these marks?”… It was hard to give them reasoning as to why it would be beneficial to them when they could be off earning money to go to college or their internship. (Blake, high school SERT)

This situation was a common complaint from high school teachers who were interviewed. With the grades guaranteed, many students chose part time work over school. In Blake’s case, without postsecondary studies on the horizon, the Grade 12 students saw no reason to bother to continue with their high school studies.

Shared purpose speaks to motivation. When schooling moved online, motivation was what compelled students to participate, but once grades were no longer on the table, a shared belief in the value of schooling in this online form was not guaranteed. Indeed, all interviewees noted that
many of the parents of their students decided their children could just opt out of participating in schooling at all.

**High quality interaction**

The nature of interactions between students and between students and teachers online, fundamental to building community, has arguably been addressed above. However, each of the elements discussed so far relates mainly to the students’ apparent beliefs. When specifically examining the quality of interactions, all of the interviewees were in agreement: overall, the quality of interactions definitely decreased.

Rowntree set up a weekly online check-in form for students to note how they were feeling:

> It was sad because we had an amazing class this year.... This was just a beautiful group of kids. They were very empathetic, very social. They just loved each other. And so to go from that and I think the quickness of it … March break … and then it just stopped. So, I think that [online] was a completely different atmosphere…. I was just sad because even the kids, they would say in some of their responses, “Oh, I miss my friends. When am I going to see my friends?” In kindergarten, social life is the foundation of learning socially appropriate ways to deal with each other. (Rowntree, FDK)

Clearly, students needed not just to interact (synchronously) with their teacher, they needed to interact with each other. For FDK, as Rowntree notes, this was really the main purpose of school. Perhaps similarly, French Immersion students were no longer immersed. Lexie taught in a middle school:

> I think what this did was it took away all of those incidental communications you have with them…. I had students that I was trying to keep an eye on and keep up with because I knew they’d had interpersonal issues throughout the year…. [I kept contacting them] to make sure that they know that they still have that support. (Lexie, middle school French Immersion)

While Lexie attempted to keep in contact with students who had, throughout the school year, felt left out or bullied when schooling was face-to-face, because these students of hers chose not to participate in the synchronous sessions she ran, the student–student interactions necessary to rectify the situation did not occur. She made attempts to create opportunities for students to learn about social exclusion in assignments, but these were done individually and could not replicate the effect of bringing students together physically to work on projects in the classroom.

Glenda, like most of the teachers interviewed, focused on interactions between herself and individual students. She tried to maintain a presence online so that students could know she was still there, but she admitted that it was still not the same as in-person had been:

> And in teaching in the moment, it wasn’t as spontaneous…. I did try to make a connection with them. I took a picture each week of a new flower that was in my garden because it was the spring and told them about it and sent them the picture and then the next week, “Oh, here's another one of my flowers. The name is....” And so every week they looked forward to what the new flower was in my garden, and they would draw a picture of it and send it back to me. But that’s not a deep connection, really. (Glenda, elementary homeroom)
The quality of interactions clearly deteriorated when teaching and learning migrated from face-to-face to online. This happened in terms of quality of interactions, the decrease in interactions between students, the lack of in-the-moment spontaneous interaction, and the decrease in richness of each interaction. All of this resulted in the classroom community being diminished in the majority of cases.

It is important to note that, for these 11 teachers, it is not the case that no students remained connected or that no community was maintained by these teachers within their classes. What was true was that, in all cases, teachers were forced to abandon students who they felt they could have reached were they face-to-face. As David put it:

I didn't like the idea of being told, “Listen, you can't do it for all the kids. Do it for as many as you can.” I don't like that because I want to teach all the kids and nobody should be left behind. And so to[effectively] be told… “Cut your losses. If you can get 20, that's great.” Yes, but those nine, they might need me. So, I never want to do that again if I can possibly help it. (David, elementary homeroom)

Discussion

All of the teachers interviewed noted that, once schooling moved online, student engagement dropped significantly as time went on. Beyond the attendance and technical problems, as they worked to translate face-to-face lessons to online, teachers focused on either the mental health of students or how to get the content across to students via the new medium.

All 11 teachers lamented the loss of community, but, for the most part, stated that their attempts to recreate the classroom community that had existed face-to-face failed. This is in keeping with findings in other studies (see, for example, Tartavulea et al., 2020). The biggest barrier was lack of participation and engagement on the part of students. Many students chose not to log on or participate because they were satisfied with their grade. Others were unable to participate because of their circumstances. Still others attempted to participate but did not feel comfortable being on camera. This last is in line with what has been observed elsewhere, where students had privacy concerns such as “anxiety/fear of being exposed/shame/shyness, desire to ensure privacy of the home/personal space, and chances that other people might walk into the background” (Gherhes et al., 2021, p. 1). Regardless of the reasons, because students and parents were able to cut off communications with teachers at will and without consequence, teachers had no means to rectify the situation. The participants featured here then resorted to focusing on student–teacher interactions with those who were making themselves available rather than the student–student interactions they would have encouraged in face-to-face classes. This lack of student–student interaction most likely led to further alienation on the part of students. Indeed, even the social distancing mandated for face-to-face classes has been found to have deleterious psychological effects on students (Sikhangezile & Modise, 2020) and, although student–student interactions online have been found to be more widespread when facilitated by the teacher, they can also be more intellectually shallow (Yu & Yuizono, 2021), which might be interpreted as students being less engaged. Although several teachers noted that they had had positive interactions with the students who did show up for synchronous meetings, in all of those classes, there were students who disappeared without explanation.

Students with special needs, living in poverty, or with pre-existing mental health issues and students who felt out of place in school or saw no point to schooling beyond the credential soon
drifted away. This learnification of schooling had a disproportionately negative effect on students who were already marginalized.

Looking at this through Rovai’s (2002) model, whatever sense of belonging may have been present in the face-to-face classes before the school closures deteriorated to the point that, in most cases, there was essentially no relationship between students. Trust in the group lost its context as learning became a one-on-one communication between teacher and student. Shared purpose was undermined by the fact that grades could not drop below where they stood when the school buildings closed. Further, because of cameras being left off and most communication being text-based, the quality of interactions deteriorated.

Rovai’s (2002) model provides a robust way to analyze the quality of community in online environments, but it does not speak to the context in which online learning occurs. Certainly, it cannot account for a pandemic and the complications that are part of an emergency situation. In this way, using Rovai’s model can limit the scope of analysis. In the case of this study, conclusions that can be drawn are further limited by the fact that I focus on a small group of teachers during a particularly unique time. However, these findings do demonstrate how brittle the online environment was during the pandemic, with few options to address low student engagement and limited methods for compensating for the structural inequities that prevented the participation of students who, in the face-to-face environment, had either already been marginalized or had needed the most accommodations. No amount of success on the part of mainstream, more well-resourced students justifies allowing such inequity to continue. If community is what is required to make online learning successful for all, the infrastructure and resources need to be provided to make that community available to all.

Conclusion

I began this article defining quality education as based in engaged pedagogy, defined by hooks (1994) as an approach that requires a classroom community built on trust and belonging. Engaged pedagogy is necessary to address and compensate for the marginalization that many students endure. I also noted that I wanted to explore whether there was equitable access to such an education during the pandemic. However, all of the discussion so far begs the question: Did these students have access to that type of education before the schools closed? The fact is that there is no way of knowing because pre-pandemic classroom observations of the participants were not possible. Thus, one might ask why such an approach should even be mentioned. Why not simply focus on the extent to which communities conducive to learning and high student engagement were created online during the pandemic? The answer is that once one accepts that quality education is engaged pedagogy, the distance between what occurred during the pandemic and what should have occurred becomes apparent. Rather than a learning community based on trust, common purpose, quality interactions, and a sense of belonging, schooling deteriorated to low student engagement, low accountability, lack of interaction between students, and loss of community, with the negative consequences borne disproportionately by the most marginalized and vulnerable students.

It was an emergency situation, and so I am careful not to impose impossible standards. With the sudden change, unclear timelines, and psychological effects of the pandemic on teachers, students, and parents, the range of pedagogical tools utilized were narrowed, as has also been observed in other jurisdictions (Tartavulea et al., 2020). Further, I am not sure if engaged pedagogy is even possible online. However, it is noteworthy that the first academic, social, and psychological casualties when the emergency occurred were the most vulnerable students. This is what needs to be addressed. Now that we have experienced emergency province-wide closures of schools and
seen the consequences, the education sector has a duty to ensure that the next time such an emergency occurs, the most vulnerable students are not once again put in a position where they must carry the burden of inadequate emergency and continency plans. Our most vulnerable students should not be an afterthought.

Author Bio

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References


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