



Stories From the Field: Sharing our Challenges and Triumphs During a Pandemic

**Teaching and
Parenting:** Reflections
of an Exhausted, but Still
Smiling, Educator

Schooling:
Not Just About the Grade

**Mr. Rankine's
Music Cabin**

THE KNOWLEDGE Forum

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2020-2021

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Note from Dean Rebecca Luce-Kapler

The essays in this issue of *The Knowledge Forum* are deeply personal reflections from Queen's Faculty of Education alumni working around the world. Navigating teaching and learning these past couple of years has provided teachers with countless challenges – but also inspired us to be creative, innovative, and even more student-centered. As you read these, you will see themes of student well-being emerge and educators taking compassionate and iterative approaches as they dealt with new restrictions, closures, and quarantines. As we are mid-way through another pandemic school year, these voices remind us to celebrate what we have all achieved. Sharing our successes and our challenges, with the Queen's community of practice helps us all reflect on our work, and our future, as educators. As Dean, I read these stories with pride in our alumni and the meaningful, inclusive, and critical work they undertake everyday with their classrooms, students, and communities.





Teaching and Parenting: Reflections of an Exhausted, but Still Smiling, Educator

BY SARAH CARLYON

It was January 2020. My partner and I were on one of our rotating strike days with our colleagues. It was cold. None of us were saying too much. At one point my partner turned to me and said, “You know, we really need to keep an eye on that virus they are seeing in China. I would bet money on it becoming a pandemic if they don’t get it under control.” I stopped in my tracks. My rose-coloured world view sometimes clashes with that of my realistic and logical partner’s. I lose myself in works of fiction while he reads non-fiction from the likes of Malcolm Gladwell and Jared Diamond. I couldn’t believe that something like a pandemic could happen to us. I laughed it off and said something like, “I guess we’ll see. I’m sure it will be fine.”

Fast forward two months, and we are in lockdown. We had a feeling we would most likely be shut down longer than the two weeks our provincial government mandated. Our five kids had many questions, and we answered them as best we could. We tried to balance honesty with optimism. We didn’t want them to worry. We didn’t want them to feel the fear we had at the pit of our stomachs.

The next few months was a whirlwind of emotions. It felt like every time we turned around, we had a new hurdle from the Ministry of Education we had to leap over. It was exhausting and mind-boggling, and the kids were feeling it too. My grade 12 students were spiraling as it became clear that they were losing their senior year. Our own children missed their friends. They missed their grandparents. We just sat in our digital world, shell shocked and unsure of next steps. It was a dark time. By the end of June, we, teachers, were treated like heroes. We had persevered. We survived this school year. I think, however, we felt like we had failed our students, and, for those of us who were parents, our own kids. We did take the much-needed break, but the fall loomed over us. We didn't know what to expect. We were all still so exhausted. Our kids were still exhausted. Most of us did not want to look at another computer screen for a long time. It is almost funny when I think about it now. We truly had no idea what exhaustion was because the upcoming school year was a whole new nightmare.

Now, I know the term "nightmare" in relation to the 2020-2021 school year may seem somewhat hyperbolic, but that is the best way I can describe it. Some of us were forced to teach using four different delivery methods: in class, synchronous, asynchronous digital, and asynchronous nondigital. We also had to teach while wearing masks and goggles or face shields (I wear glasses, so this was especially interesting). We were always on edge, and if a student in the school tested positive, your heart would drop and a million different scenarios would go through your mind. As a parent, I had to deal with the "Your child is a confirmed close contact with someone who has tested positive" phone call more than once.

The fear you feel at that point is indescribable. The thought still brings me to tears. Our province had a total of two shutdowns for the school year. I was quarantined due to exposure, along with 10 of my colleagues and multiple students in our school. While in shutdown, there was so much more expected of teachers because we were supposed to plan and prepare for this. Honestly, you can never fully prepare for teaching online for months at a time. My final two classes of the year were all students I had never met. We made it through, but I am still haunted by the idea that I failed them. My kids, ages 8-16, lost 2 years of school. All the kids did. Their last normal school year was 2018-2019.

They have lost so much, but they have also learned much along the way. We still have a lot we will need to address mental health-wise, but I think this generation will take the lessons they have learned and go far. As for me and my education colleagues, I am not sure we can put into words where we stand right now. We have been tested in ways we never thought we would be. Our expertise has been blatantly ignored in favour of political gains. Our cries for help and change have often fallen on deaf ears. We still hold our heads high, though. We know that we must keep moving forward and keep it together for our students and our own children. We will be ok because we have no other choice. In the words of Tennyson:

Tho' much is taken, much abides; and though
We are not now that strength which in old days
Moved earth and heaven; that which we are, we are;
One equal temper of heroic hearts,
Made weak by time and fate, but strong in will
To strive, to seek, to find, and not to yield.

Ulysses

Sarah Carlyon became a Queen's alumna in 2019 after completing her M.Ed. at the Faculty of Education, under the supervision of Dr. Liying Cheng. Her educational career, however, started 14 years ago when she was first employed as a secondary English teacher in a rural school board in eastern Ontario. Currently employed as an ESL Itinerant Teacher, Sarah believes that equity is an essential part of a quality education for all. When not working with students and teachers, Sarah enjoys spending time with her blended family, which includes five kids, four cats, two dogs, and one incredibly supportive partner.

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Inspiring Creativity and Community During a Pandemic

BY JOOLA COKE-TALBOT

“How do we foster a school community during a pandemic?” As a middle school teacher at a small international school, it was the norm for me to watch students interact with each other daily. Recess and lunchtime were opportunities for students of all grades to play together. However, once we abruptly started distanced learning in late spring, those daily interactions came to a halt. After a chaotic end to the 2020 school year, my colleagues and I knew that we needed to implement a program moving forward that promoted community interactions with the students, a program that could hopefully substitute for the lost interactions.

Our Original Goal

When my fellow teachers and I started brainstorming what type of program we wanted to create, one of our main goals was to provide a balance between choice and guidance. During the pandemic lockdown, there was an overall lack of autonomy felt throughout our communities. We wanted to allow our students to experience some sense of control and to have individualized learning. Keeping that in mind, we were also aware that some students would require guidance and motivation when choosing what project to create.

Passion Projects

Loosely based on the Genius Hour movement, our program sought to enable students to explore authentic, meaningful learning by exploring their interests, learning new skills, being creative, and connecting with each other. Each week, students

would have two classes: one live with their homeroom teacher and one asynchronous. The live session would be for them to present their work, ask questions about their classmates' projects and complete a reflection on how their learning process was throughout the week. The asynchronous session was to allow students time to work on their projects and Zoom with their teacher if they needed help.

We introduced a new theme every other week, where they would create a Passion Project based on that theme. For the community aspect, our students from grade 5 to grade 8 would make short 2 to 3-minute videos on Flipgrid where they would share their learning process and show their final project. The videos were shared in a folder, so all the students could see what their classmates created and were encouraged to like and comment on the ones that interested them. We also shared some projects with our entire school community, not just the middle school. Since each theme continued for two weeks, students were able to observe what others did and develop more complex versions of their original creations or explore new ideas that were inspired by others. It allowed for students to reflect and reassess what they were going to do for week 2.

We planned for 16 weeks of eight themes, including self-care, creative expression, making something they could share with someone, demonstrating thankfulness, helping out their community, and more.

Here is a summary of our weekly format:

Week 1:

- Introduce theme for the next two weeks
- Students choose their Passion Project
- Once completed, they create a Flipgrid video presenting their project and post it in the shared video folder before their next live session.

Week 2:

- In the live session, students watch their classmates' videos and comment on projects that interested them
- Students reflect on their projects and reassess how to improve/redesign or choose a new idea
- Before the next live session, students complete their new project, a Flipgrid video, and post it in the shared video folder again.

Time to Modify

The students flourished at first. Then, a month and a half later, even with our best intentions, there were some bumps in the road. With the majority of the students, there was a decrease in accountability and quality of work. Since the work was not graded, some students, who were motivated by grades, lacked the motivation to continue doing their work. Some students were clearly not taking it seriously, not even trying or turning in poor videos with no details. So, we had to do some re-tweaking. Our new plan added an element of competition, created a rubric, and clarified the purpose of the program with the students. Unfortunately, the revised version worked for only another two weeks and we decided to have a competition for our last theme, where students watched all the videos from the past weeks and voted for their favourite project. Then, we planned a rebranding.

As we reassessed, our new idea incorporated more technological aspects. The class time could be spent with students practicing skills that were connected to more applicable “real-world” skills while still being in an of interest. We needed to introduce a program that was relatable to students, one that reflects the digital society our students are growing up in. So, Passion Projects became Digital Skills.

Digital Skills

With the revamp, students were able to use different websites and programs to develop their digital and technological skills. The format was similar to the Passion Projects because we wanted to lessen the learning adjustment the students would need as they got used to a new program. There was still one synchronous and one asynchronous session per week. But now, the task was not to create a Passion Project but to work on two technology projects per week. Students had the choice of creating a coding activity, Google Applied project, or work on several typing activities. Students had three main choices:

- 1) Learn how to code from Code.org
- 2) Improve their typing skills on TypingClub.com
- 3) Try projects from Google Applied Skills from Google for Education



They could mix and match but were required to do a minimum of two activities every week. To solve the intrinsic versus extrinsic motivation issue, the program would now be a part of their technology class grade and included in their report card. For the reflection aspect, during each live lesson, they would meet with the teacher and reflect on their learning process, similar to what they did during the Passion Projects. They would answer questions such as:

- “What did you struggle with before, and how did you change your actions to improve?”
- “What new things do you know how to do that you didn’t know before?”
- “What evidence can you share to demonstrate your learning?”

With this new reflection form, students were able to illustrate how they improved every week, which motivated them to continue improving. To continue the community aspect, students were encouraged to share their projects with their classmates and keep up to date with what new skills they were learning.

What I Learned

It took a couple of weeks for students to buy into the new program and get used to the format, but it was much more successful as the weeks continued. The greatest change from the Passion Projects to Digital Skills is that I could concretely see how the program helped develop skills within our students. To witness students sharing their skills and how they improved was great to see. Even though issues occurred as the program developed, the bumps in the road helped me understand how to create meaningful and engaging opportunities for students to not only demonstrate their growth but also to interact with their peers during a time when many of us in our school community craved connection.

Joola Coke-Talbot is a recent graduate of Queen’s University, where she completed her Bachelor’s of Education and Bachelors of Arts. She is an international teacher, currently working in Honduras at Escuela Internacional Sampedrana as the Social Studies Department Head. Having worked predominantly in upper elementary and middle school education, she is focused on fostering curiosity-driven and long-lasting learning experiences for her students.

The Virtual Majlis: An Online Community of Care

BY SHERI HENDERSON AND YONGQI ZOU

The Background – What, Why, How



"Offline Majlis" at Tim Horton's

In the fall of 2020, I began hosting a weekly English conversation hour online as part of my duties as a writing specialist at The Write Place at King's University College. I had come up with the idea and hosted a couple conversation hours in early 2020, and then, well, you know...COVID-19. As it became clear that we would not return to campus in fall 2020, I thought there might be interest to have casual conversations in English remotely.

The inspiration for The Virtual Majlis was two-fold: first, its name honours the spaces found in every community and home in the United Arab Emirates, where I lived for almost 20 years. A majlis is a communal social space where people gather to meet and discuss what's going on, to share news, solve problems, and support one another in times of need. By creating The Virtual Majlis, I hoped to emulate these welcoming spaces by inviting students to meet, converse, gain confidence in speaking English, and help create some feeling of community during continuing pandemic restrictions. Second, this activity was inspired by the very successful weekly "Kaffeeeklatsch" activity I managed for the German Department at Queen's in the mid-1980s; speakers of German – both as first and as an additional language – came together to converse in German, exchange ideas, share news, and celebrate our cultures and traditions while improving our linguistic fluency.

The Virtual Majlis was intended as place for students to get together, to make friends, to share experiences, and to ask questions – all while using an additional language. The participants are the experts here: They advise their peers – kindly, collaboratively, wisely – using English! What quickly became clear was that the social and emotional benefits of connecting with one another during the pandemic was of much more importance: The weekly language gathering often had much greater value for our mental health and well-being. The Virtual Majlis also became a hub for us to engage in culturally relevant, responsive, and sustaining discussions about our varied backgrounds.

Intended to bring students together for the 2020-2021 academic year, our weekly meets ended up continuing throughout the summer of 2021 and to my surprise, this group of 20-something Chinese students kept coming to talk with me, someone older than most of their parents. The Virtual Majlis has been a triumph which sustained not only students, but me as well. Located worlds and generations apart, experiencing the ups and downs of an undeniably challenging year, The Virtual Majlis has been a place of solace and support, of joy and laughter: a community of

care. Its overall success, however, is down to the dedicated efforts of one passionate young woman, a first-year student named Yongqi (Kitty) Zou.

Yongqi's Reflection

I have participated in The Virtual Majlis since the last term. It has been such a wonderful experience with Prof. Henderson; she is really kind, patient, and understanding. I was almost the only student who attended the meeting last year, and I was so appreciative that Prof. Henderson was always with me. My purpose for the meeting was to practice my oral English, but I gradually found that what I gained from this event was far more than that. Prof. Henderson told me many interesting things about Canada and her experience in the UAE, and I also shared my own culture and things that happened to me with her. More importantly, because of the COVID-19 and the study pressure, I was upset and frustrated for some time. Prof. Henderson has always cheered me up and made me feel that I was not alone (during the meeting or through emails). After the meeting, we still kept in touch with each other (we are more like friends, sharing photos, and sending electronic cards) by emails.

The only pity from the last year was that there were only two people in the discussion. Therefore, I decided to promote the activity in the Chinese students' group chat during the winter break. The advertising was effective. About 25 students joined the WeChat group that I had set up for The Virtual Majlis. Before the first meeting, I constantly contacted Prof. Henderson, negotiated the regular meeting time and updated the information in the group chat. I was happy that many of our members are enthusiastic and they actually enjoy the activity. It is quite different from the meeting I had with Prof. Henderson one on one because there are more students and we can discuss a topic from many different perspectives – it is more open and diverse! I could also meet some new friends though it is still an online setting (at least I can see some of the faces). In addition, I could also feel that The Virtual Majlis provides us a great platform that we as international students dare speak English freely without too much concern about our grammar mistakes and pronunciation problems. Again, I am quite appreciative about everything. The Virtual Majlis brings us close to each other during this difficult time. ❤️

I hope The Virtual Majlis could continue when we are all back at King's.

Sheri's Reflection

As Kitty notes, she and I were the only attendees for most of the fall term, which ended up allowing me to connect closely with her and begin to understand the effects of remote learning from a student perspective. I learned that the shift to virtual learning required a good number of students to attend synchronous classes, which for some meant attending and taking tests or giving presentations in the middle of the night. I heard that students and instructors located in London seemed unaware that people in their groups might not be in the same time zone.

My intercultural intelligence and understanding of Chinese culture grew by leaps and bounds. I learned about Chinese history and holidays, as well as regional traditions, linguistic dialects and culture. I learned how to cook the dumplings I'd found in London and was taught recipes for authentic sauces to prepare. In turn, I tried to answer questions about all things Canadian, as well as explain idiomatic expressions and how to answer rhetorical questions – things which confuse us all. What struck me was the level of care demonstrated by these students for their peers which was evident in every session as we checked in on one another each time we met.

Every bit of class-related information shared by the group members was an opportunity for me to consider my own pedagogy; Was I making sure that my own students understood that my primary concern was for their well-being first, and that curriculum was second? To reinforce my presence, I started sending voice notes and more screencasts to personalize check-ins with my students, a strategy noted by Spencer (2020). The perceptions of online learning shared by students in The Virtual Majlis were critical to me reinforcing my longstanding "Maslow before Bloom" approach to teaching. I found that during the shift to emergency remote learning, students in both my blended and fully asynchronous course engaged more with the course's content, and with me. Email communications showed much deeper and more thoughtful involvement with the curriculum, and compared to the previous year's traditional in-person class, I saw more willingness among students to reach out to me: I saw a definite increase in learner agency. Mavridi (2021) insists "it's pedagogical presence, not physical presence that matters" and believes that online settings may allow us to build far more meaningful relationships with students than in traditional classrooms. I wholeheartedly agree.

Sheri Henderson, Yongqi Zou, and Yifang Zhang at the Virtual Majlis



Student-Driven Success

Yongqi emerged as a natural leader of The Virtual Majlis. It is solely through her efforts that this activity was a success. Very early on she provided a post about The Virtual Majlis on The Write Place's Instagram; next, she volunteered to recruit new members over the winter break, and then surveyed students through WeChat to determine a time slot which would allow for maximum participation. Yongqi collected topics for discussion and while we usually started out talking about one of those, conversation inevitably reverted to current events in students' lives: movies, parents, courses, hopes, hobbies, and obsessions, such as LEGO. The word cloud below shows the incredible diversity of topics we discussed over the year. Attendance grew through Yongqi's determined efforts.



There were a variety of conversation topics.

After reading week, our group grew smaller, which actually allowed for us to learn more about one another, become closer, and thus check in on each other more specifically. Some students had been to Canada, so there was much advice shared about how to negotiate living abroad, as well as studying abroad. One week a student (following full masking and distancing protocols) zoomed in from the London city bus, sharing views of London's public transit system and of London streetscapes from the bus, and on his walk to his first day at a new job. Seeing London 'in real time' was exciting for those hoping to make their way to campus in fall 2021.

As the winter term drew to a close, it became quite clear that The Virtual Majlis had become very important to us and the group started asking if we would continue to meet over the summer. With the third wave of the pandemic in full swing, it's not like I was going anywhere so with my own schedule wide open, I readily agreed to a summer edition of The Virtual Majlis. Yongqi, ever resourceful, was able to recruit more new members to join us. Perhaps with the pressure of the school year behind us, our weekly chats started lasting at least a couple hours, and if I had to go, I made Yongqi the host so the conversation could continue.

When it became clear that a return to campus would be happening in fall 2021, Yongqi acted yet again to coordinate an “Offline Majlis” meet-up in London. With pandemic restrictions loosening, we decided to meet on Labour Day 2021 at a Tim Horton’s in London, a truly Canadian venue easy for all to reach. It was exciting to meet in person, although masking made it a little tricky to recognize one another! As always, there was much to discuss, in particular quarantine experiences and housing upsets. With the business of a new academic year, of being on campus, exploring a new city and taking on new jobs, Yongqi created a WhatsApp group chat in order for us to stay connected. Using this platform we continue to share news, photos, highlight events, and offer support to each other.

The Virtual Majlis proved to be not only linguistically beneficial, but it was a socially and emotionally sustaining space, whose online setting allowed for anyone to take part from anywhere with an internet connection (from a hotel room while on vacation, from a phone when visiting relatives, from a city bus). We formed significant relationships - across generations, across cultures, across time zones. As Gray (2020) reminds us “we have to love each other, to extend care and grace” and this is what I saw transpire in The Virtual Majlis. This virtual community of care arose from an innovative response to the external prohibitions imposed by a global pandemic; technology allowed for the intentional blurring of physical, cultural, and generational borders to allow a community of resilience and hope to exist where we became stronger together.

Sheri Henderson holds a BA and B.Ed. from Queen's and a MSc from Aston University. She has taught on four continents and worked with people of over 100 nationalities. Recognized in 2019 as one of Queen's Faculty of Education's top 50 in 50 educators, she teaches Writing at King's University College at Western and English at Montcalm SS in the Thames Valley DSB. **Yongqi Zou** is in her second year at King's University College at Western. Psychology and Childhood and Youth Studies (used to be Childhood and Social Institutions). She works as a vice president assistant in Chinese International Volunteer Organization (CIVO) in London.

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Mr. Rankine's Music Cabin

BY DAVID RANKINE

On March 16, 2020, I woke up early with a feeling of uncertainty and a sense of wonder. The Ontario Government had just initiated a province-wide lockdown and I wondered what was going to happen to my family, my community, and more specifically, my 800 kindergarten to grade 6 music students. As the first day of the COVID-19 pandemic impacted all areas of public and private life, Ontario schools were shuttered for what would amount to more than three months leaving students, educators, and families stuck in a web of nervousness and uncertainty. I wondered out loud, "What am I going to do?"

Before the provincial lockdown, students at Kingston East Elementary School (formerly École Sir John A. Macdonald PS) were not learning "about" music, but rather were busy "doing" music with May Day festivals, family folk dances, musicals, and long-term care home showcases just to name a few. Classes were filled with excitement and wonder as students were always singing, dancing, playing, and improvising with their voices and other instruments. When I learned that Ontario schools would become virtual, I was initially saddened about the loss of community building and creation that always followed in-person learning. Fortunately, since I had just begun my own DIY maple syrup production, I had ample time to ponder the many ways I could re-design an already vibrant and experiential music program. Just like the sap continued to flow, the ideas soon followed.

The ancient Chinese Proverb, "I hear and I forget, I see and I remember, I do and I understand" has always been at the forefront of my teaching and learning. How could I go about developing an online learning experience where children were joyfully engaged and for whom learning was but a "seamless process of effortless assimilation?" (Feierabend, 1992) Then it hit me.

As I continued on my fun-filled journey of splitting wood, boiling down sap, and producing litre after litre the liquid gold, I decided to turn our forested property and house into a film and recording studio and develop an interactive program that mirrored the likes of Mr. Rogers and the hit PBS Series – Lomax the Hound of Music. From this idea was born, Mr. Rankine's Music Cabin. It wasn't long before the walk-out basement of our home was entirely transformed into a rustic cabin complete with a grand piano, stove, magic maple syrup, puppets, and surrounded by instruments galore. Lights, microphones, computers, and green screens filled every available space and no evidence of my original cozy basement remained. Mr. Rankine's Music Cabin is a joyful, research-based, and engaging educational program based on my good friend Dr. John Feierabend's First Steps in Music and Conversational Solfege curricula (Feierabend, 2006). Each episode contains a variety of Canadian and international folk songs, games, and dances, promotes active learning, and compels children to participate in tuneful, beautiful, and artful activities. Whether awakening the sensation of their singing voices by echoing a slide whistle, or dancing and developing music literacy skills with the likes of Canada's Natalie McMaster or the Barra MacNeils, this program is aimed at children in preschool through middle elementary and is aligned for in-person learning and online teaching and assessment. After creating more than 35 episodes, I received a very welcomed call from GIA, a company which publishes music education resources, asking if I was interested in having my creations published. Not being one to shy away from new and exciting opportunities, it wasn't long before I was a guest presenter on a GIA webinar about distance teaching with Dr. John Feierabend and Dr. Karen Howard. Many months of editing ensued, but by January 2021, eight episodes of Mr. Rankine's Music Cabin have been made available for streaming anywhere in the world. It is amazing how many new and positive innovations have emerged as a result of this global pandemic and I am so grateful for the family and collegial support in helping to build community through music. Visit giamusic.com to find all episodes of Mr. Rankine's Music Cabin.

David Rankine has been teaching music in Kingston area schools, community organizations, and historic sites for more than 20 years. He received his B.A. and B.Ed. from Queen's University where he received the L.W. Copp Teaching Award and is a former Drum Major of the Fort Henry Guard and Queen's Bands. A Certified Teacher Trainer in First Steps in Music and Conversational Solfege, David is the former organist for the Kingston Frontenacs OHL Hockey Franchise and has received numerous grants and donations under the umbrella of 'Building Community Through Music.' These proceeds have enabled more than 800 K-6 students to annually take part in and host folk festivals, May Day festivals, and family folk dances. David lives in a forest just north of Kingston, Ontario, Canada, with his wife and two children, Eva and George.

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Schooling: Not Just About the Grade

BY KATY ELDRIDGE



The COVID-19 pandemic changed the world of education in Ontario. The words *pivot* and *fluid* became ubiquitous as educators were required to learn an entirely new way of teaching in two weeks, followed by an entire year of pandemic teaching. In the 2021-2022 school year learning and shifting from the pandemic is ongoing. This essay brings together my conversations with colleagues as we reflected on our time teaching online and the continually changing education landscape.

The mental health and well-being of students had a sharp decline throughout 2020. A study by Kids Help Phone in December 2020 saw a 51% increase from March-December 2020 with youth reaching out “more than 4 million times in 2020” (Yousif, 2020). Students across the province struggled with isolation, lack of autonomy, and a drastic change in their daily habits. COVID is demonstrating the need for relationships, relationship building, and emphasizing the necessity of in-person learning. When in-person learning was impossible due to school shutdowns, teachers aimed to bolster their virtual classroom community, continuing to make it a safe place to learn and grow, and a place where students can have connections with their peers and their teachers – even through a screen.

Mental health, engagement, ensuring students felt safe, community, and routine were the main areas mentioned when I spoke with my colleagues across the province. There was little pressure on grades, especially in the first shutdown in Ontario from March to June 2020, and one educator pointed out any pressure felt self-imposed. While there is plenty of learning happening, there is a definite shift in what this learning looks like. Grades, it seems, took a backseat.

A teacher in the Peel District School Board indicated that he focused on ensuring that he asks about his students’ day in his virtual classes. He notes that finding a personal connection to his students led to increased engagement in the class – a practice that will continue to have impact when we return to our in-person routines. Students respond to reminders that someone cares about their well-being. He also was able to share about himself in the process which he valued as a key element in building community in his virtual classroom. He reflects, “Once students can see the humanity of their teacher, they are willing to participate and are more engaged in the course”. A positive teacher-student relationship is seen as a preventative means that impacts credit completion and graduation rates, reduces behavioural outbursts, and ultimately improves student engagement (Martin & Collie). This educator was able to transfer the skills he was using in the classroom to the virtual learning environment and allow students to know there is a caring adult that is there for them, even when learning online.

A teacher in the Limestone school board spoke with me about the need for having similar routines to the in person learning schedule to allow for consistency with her students. Maintaining a similar daily structure gave stability to students within the class. A teacher in Durham spoke about how mental health is always first and curriculum is second. This meant that daily check-ins were important, as was a routine to guide the day, and a friendly face on the screen regularly. Some students in their final year of secondary school faced a struggle with assessment – a necessity for post-secondary applications. This meant a lot of students and families were struggling to “keep up”. An educator in Kingston aimed to alleviate the concerns surrounding grading by speaking one-on-one with her students and their families to discuss the academic requirements of the course.

Many educators found it necessary to create ways that the students could have one-on-one conversations with the teacher about a variety of things beyond academics as well. These conversations included difficulties at home, fear of the coronavirus, questions about the course, or other concerns. Many times, the issues that arose came from uncertainty about what was going to happen. Students were often preoccupied by the uncertainty of the pandemic – and not knowing when things might change.

One educator pointed out that we cannot speak about students' mental health and well-being in a vacuum as the family is very much a part of the at home learning experience. She says, "It takes a lot of privilege to be able to have this time and energy to devote to your children whilst still working yourself and trying to keep things afloat. For students who did not have access to this support, they got much less 'education' than those who did". When returning to school in September 2021 many educators kept this in the back of their minds as they continued to support their students to do their personal best.

Overall, the educators I spoke with indicated that everyone is doing their best they continue to teach amid a pandemic. The focus on connection, feeling safe, mental health and well-being, and creating a positive virtual learning environment was at the forefront for all these educators. Assessment and grading, while important, was not a primary focus for many of the educators. I cannot say whether this led to students feeling more successful or supported their mental health and well-being, but in my observations and through these conversations with colleagues, there was a definite improvement in student engagement and notable changes to mental health when educators put community first. The teachers I spoke to recognize that students need a focus on relationships and continue to build and maintain these relationships whether in-person or online to ensure increased mental health and well-being through this tumultuous time.



Katy Eldridge is a secondary school teacher in PDSB, a Queen's University alum and a doctoral candidate at OISE. She has two beautiful girls, a dog, and a wonderful husband who all allow her the time to write! Katy thanks her colleagues from across the province for sharing their insights, care, and compassion for students while in the midst of a pandemic.

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Optimizing Recess to Promote Well-being: The Perspective from Grade 4

BY CAITLIN TINO

The onset of the pandemic caused my elementary school, an independent school for boys in Toronto, to quickly re-imagine recess protocols in order to keep students safe. Changes included the duration and frequency, limitations to the activities that could be played, assignment of student cohorts, recess supervision requirements, and recess locations. While at first, it was feared that these changes might be detrimental to recess because of the many limitations imposed, initial anecdotal observations showcased that instead, many of these changes were optimal to student well-being, at a time when prioritizing student well-being was needed more than ever. As such, I aimed to more closely examine how recess could be optimized to achieve well-being from the grade 4 boy perspective at our school, in hopes that these learnings could be maintained through the pandemic and beyond.

It is well known that recess is an integral part of elementary school education; it provides many opportunities to develop cognitive, social, and emotional skills (London, 2019; Ryan and Deci, 2000; Kang 2021). Well-being is achieved when children are provided with an opportunity to engage in authentic play and be creative, when they feel that they belong and have friends, and when they are provided with the chance to rest and recharge (London, 2019; Ryan and Deci, 2000; Kang 2021). Conversely, when recess is not executed deliberately, it can lead to adverse student outcomes and becomes a missed opportunity for meaningful student growth (London, 2019). Interestingly, while it is well known that children benefit from recess, regardless of gender, limited research exists regarding a boy-specific design (Massey, Neilson, & Salas, 2019). As such, many preconceived generalizations of gender become influential in recess offerings and often become limiting to achievement of their personal well-being (Massey, Neilson, & Salas, 2019).

This action research project included fourteen grade 4 boys. Data collection spanned across three weeks, and students engaged in six activities that they selected, each for a 30-minute duration. These activities were:

- free choice – free play in the formal garden
- games of low organization – capture the flag at the trailhead
- makerspace – exploring Inukshuks in the rock quarry
- sports – soccer on the field
- fitness – nature hike on the trail
- art – sidewalk chalk on the walkway

An assessment tool known as the System for Observing Play and Leisure in Youth (SOPLAY), was used to measure physical activity levels during each activity across three categories: sedentary, walking, and vigorous. Following each activity, students completed a written reflection in their digital workbook. Lastly, a survey was administered to eleven teachers assigned to recess supervision to extend findings.

Five themes emerged from the study and should be considered in future recess design in order to optimize their achievement of well-being through the pandemic and onwards.

Recess Framework: For each activity the **achievement of play, belonging, and recharge** was reported for at least one child. This finding confirms that **one recess design does not meet the well-being needs of every child**. Providing a variety of activities during recess ensures that every child can meet their well-being needs. Activities that achieved moderate levels of movement patterns were perceived to be the most enjoyable by the boys. As it takes a while for children to find their way at recess, the 30-minute duration was deemed the optimal length.

Setting and Location: Providing **varied locations** for recess had a profound impact on the student recess experience. It was evident that students enjoyed visiting different locations. Opportunity to engage with the natural world using sticks, rocks, plants, and puddles **increased student engagement and their creativity benefited greatly**.

Friendships: It was evident that the boys care deeply about the **connections** they make with their friends and the **importance of feeling like they belong**. Student cohorting positively increased the ability for all students to form meaningful bonds. Caution should be exhibited when students can choose their peer groups freely and have the option to exclude others and leverage social currency.

Teacher Supervision: **Teacher involvement** was observed to play an influential role in the success of recess. Conflict resolution could occur more rapidly and successfully, which improved students' feelings of belonging. Similarly, as many children are relational learners, they gravitated to activities that involved teacher-led instruction and participation, as it provided them with the foundation to experience a successful recess.



Gender Assumptions: Many **gendered assumptions** about boys and their active nature exist, and it is often believed that recess is the time for vigorous physical activity and playing sports. Results from the study showcase that engaging in vigorous activities had no bearing on the achievement of well-being at recess, nor was this the student preference.

Overall, incidents of **negative recess outcomes** were observed to be reduced in the new design. Maladaptive behaviours did still occur under several scenarios, which included overly competitive game play, lack of understanding of game rules, and feeling bored or feeling defeated when they were unsuccessful. It is suggested

that activities that result in maladaptive behaviours be identified and avoided.

In summary, the grade 4 boys in this study made clear their personal preferences for recess design to optimize their well-being and challenged many preconceived assumptions. Currently these changes remain in place at my school and we continue to see improved recess outcomes. As educators enter the third school year of the pandemic and beyond, we must continue to prioritize student well-being, and recess provides a unique opportunity for intervention.

Caitlin Tino (Ed'10, MEd'14) is a Physical and Health Education Specialist who works at an Independent School for boys in Toronto. Her research interests include curriculum design and program evaluation.

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The Story of the 2019-2020 Banff Elementary Music Program

BY GRACE GADON

The COVID-19 pandemic has presented many challenges to our education system. Teachers, parents, and students have had to be creative in their approach to learning. Music programs have had to push to be even more accessible to students, using technology in presenting and assessing knowledge in new ways.

When the pandemic hit in March 2020, I knew I had to utilize technology in a creative yet accessible way for my students. Even though music programming was not a top priority for many schools as online learning began, my principal encouraged me to develop a new way to teach my core music values virtually. As my teaching style encompasses Orff education, a creative and active approach to music that involves learning through movement, drama, song, speech, and percussion, I knew that this was not going to be a simple task.

I chose *Google Classroom* as my platform to create a musical space for each of my classes and used this as a tool to connect students with each other as well as with me. Through this platform, I developed a weekly plan for students to explore core musical areas such as **composition** through tools like *Typedrummer* and *Incredibox*; **movement** through *Tik Tok* inspired dance challenges; the **study of instrument families** and “phones” through indoor and outdoor scavenger hunts in our beautiful national park; and **song** through video recorded sing-back exercises. Each weekly lesson had activities that encompassed my Orff style of teaching while also allowing students to have flexibility in their learning. If a student did not live in a space that lent itself to music-making, they had the choice of heading outdoors to explore sound

instead. If a student was not capable of using online recording tools, they could send me a photo of their creation. I led discussions and encouraged commentary on our popular ‘video of the week’ which highlighted students’ exploration of materials through photos and videos. Weekly online Google meetings allowed me to introduce the material with students in fun ways, including interactive *Boom Cards* flashcard games or a 5-minute hunt for sounds in the home, which often led to impromptu ‘homemade band practices’.

Most importantly, our meetings focused on student submissions to build interest and excitement about the students’ experience of musical learning in their own ways. I had submissions of electronic music composition pieces using *Chrome Music Lab*, others hiked up mountains and submitted “found sounds” from nature. Students turned their living rooms into stages, performing for our school’s ‘virtual talent show’ and some used pre-recorded levelled lessons to self-teach the recorder, one working her way up to ‘Gold Belt’s’ *Eine Kleine Nachtmusik*! Even parents joined in for activities, assisting as videographers for student performances or rounding up kitchen utensils as percussion instruments for virtual play-alongs!

In June 2020, I co-created a video with a local Banff musician capturing the vast musical learning that our students produced over the course of the first three months of online learning. It will forever be my pandemic musical ‘time capsule’ and serves as a reminder that music can be enjoyed anywhere, in any form, and by any means and can connect us all during challenging times. View Grace’s video: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wfwqSVT81Dk>.

Grace Gadon (B.Mus.’10, Ed’11) is originally from Porcupine, Ontario and is working as a music teacher with the Canadian Rockies Public School Board at Banff Elementary School in Alberta. She loves teaching piano, anything Macaulay Culkin, visiting waterparks, scouting film locations (Hi Schitt’s Creek hotel and the McAllister’s house!) and working alongside the diverse student population in our first national park.

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