

Education [and Schooling] in a Pivotal Time

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Abstract

While the terms “schooling” and “education” are often used as if they are synonymous, they name different, yet complementary, aspects of a child’s learning experience. Education is a birth-to-forever process that is undertaken by parents and family members. Schooling is just one part of that education process. To reach desired educational outcomes for students, it is imperative that we step away from “schoolcentric” practices and instead “walk alongside” parents and families as they work to realize their hopes and dreams for their children.

I remember attending my son Cohen’s parent-teacher conference in the spring of his Grade 1 year. In the area of Social Studies, his teacher’s comments were extensive and effusive. While the curriculum, she noted, focused on family and community, she expressed her awe of Cohen’s vast knowledge of curricular concepts reflective of social studies expectations in grade levels much beyond Grade 1. She shared examples of things he had said and created that evidenced his knowledge of provincial government, of the role of the Premier as leader of the province, and of how political parties campaign for voter support. It was obvious that she had been awaiting our conference time with much enthusiasm; she was so excited to share her amazing discoveries of Cohen’s knowledge with us. That moment, for me as a parent, was uplifting—and disheartening. While it filled my heart to see that my child’s teacher valued my son’s knowledge and interests, it became readily apparent that she did not know much about our family, about who we were or what we did, about the home context in which Cohen was learning and growing.

At the time, my partner Laurie was working in the Premier’s office. He had about a 10-year history of roles in government, primarily working in ministerial offices within the legislative building. Cohen had visited the Legislature a number of times over the years, sat on the Premier’s knee as a toddler, spent time in a campaign office and at political rallies, and attended the children’s “Breakfast with the Premier” session at a political party’s convention. While Cohen was learning social studies at school, he was also immersed in a rich education at home, one that included natural and authentic life experiences through which he gained knowledge and understanding of both provincial governmental and political processes. Had the teacher known more about Laurie’s career background, about his personal, practical, and professional funds of knowledge (Elbaz, 1981; Gonzalez et al., 2005; Moll et al., 2005; Polanyi, 1958; Pushor, 2015a), how might she have had greater insight into Cohen as a student and as a learner in her classroom? Why is it important for teachers to know children’s families and the way in which parents are engaged with their children in and out of school times and places?

Schooling Is Just 20% of a Child's Education

Children are awake approximately 16 hours a day and, in those waking hours, they are in school from approximately 9 a.m. to 3:30 p.m. each weekday, for about 36 weeks of the year. Let's do some math:

16 awake hours/day x 365 days/year = 5,840 hours/year.

6.5 hours/day x 5 days/week x 36 weeks/year = 1,170 hours in school/year.

1,170 hours out of 5,840 awake hours = 20% of children's awake time is spent in school.

If only 20% of children's awake time is spent in school, that means that for 80% of their time they are learning and living in spaces and places other than schools. What are the implications of these percentages for teachers and schools?

Parents Educate Their Children From Birth to Forever

I believe passionately that education begins the moment a child is born. Parents and family members bring that baby into their home and, as they rock, sing, and read to the child, as they introduce the child to the world around them, as they do things with them, as they take them places, as they teach them things, the child's education unfolds. When a child arrives at school in Prekindergarten, Kindergarten, or Grade 1, they have already had years of education. That education continues for 80% of the child's schooling years, and then, once the child exits the school system, the child continues to be educated by their parents and family members as they apply for jobs or postsecondary education, as they learn to do their taxes or negotiate rental or mortgage agreements, as they move into the new realms of their adult life. Education, then, is a lifelong process under the purview of parents and family. It encapsulates all that they do to realize their hopes and dreams for their child and to support that child in realizing their own hopes and dreams. Schooling, while a critical and formalized part of a child's education, is just one element in that birth-to-forever process. If teachers do not know how parents and families are educating their children, they are missing opportunities to bring that learning into curriculum, to build on home and community learning, to honor families' culture and identity, and to work together toward learning outcomes, rather than working in isolation.

Moses (2022) labeled this phenomenon of teachers' lack of awareness of the education children are receiving at home as "consistently invisible family engagement." To explain, she wrote that her parents were "intentionally consistent" in their parenting of her and her sibling and yet, most of their consistent efforts were "invisible" to her teachers and administrators (para. 1). I remember a time when I took a class of graduate students to a Sweatlodge ceremony in a Reserve community close to the city. A Sweatlodge is a spiritual ceremony for prayer and healing, that in our case was led by Cree, Ojibway, and Dakota Elders who know the language, songs, traditions, and protocols of their culture's inherited tradition. In the dimness of the low, domed lodge, just before the door to the Sweatlodge was sealed, a vice principal seated beside me leaned over with excitement and told me that two of the Indigenous youth across the circle were Grade 8 students at her school. She admitted that she did not know that they participated in cultural ceremonies. As the two youth sang and drummed within the ceremony,

her understanding of them as leaders, as significant members of their community, and of their culture and identity grew immensely. Now that she knew what she knew, what might she change for all of them in terms of teaching and learning opportunities and possibilities?

What the Pandemic Brought to the Surface for Many

When schools closed because of the Covid-19 pandemic, many children moved to online learning or to home schooling arrangements while others became lost to the school system during this period. This interruption of in-school learning prompted an outcry about the “learning gaps” and the “learning loss” that would result. Children’s learning was being spoken of as if it was a near to complete loss yet, given what we can see from the math I did above, what children lost was some portion of their 20% of schooling time. Children continued to live and learn in the spaces and places that comprised the other 80% of their lives during this time, as invisible as that may have been to their teachers, school leaders, and/or to other educational experts or policymakers.

What public and educational discussion of learning loss reflected was a “schoolcentric” (Lawson, 2003) view of children’s teaching and learning experiences. It was a view that ascribed value only to the 20%, to the formalized component of their education, and not to the consistently invisible family engagement that was also contributing to the teaching and learning opportunities in the other 80% of children’s education. What was centered in this narrow schoolcentric view of children’s education was the school curricula and the attainment of defined outcomes sought within that curricula. What became the focus of discussion, and, in many cases, cause for alarm, was the work that parents were doing—or not doing—to support formal curricular learning during their children’s school closures.

When children returned to school, the alarm about learning gaps and losses prompted a strong focus in schools on the need for interventions, interventions that would reduce the gaps and would help to rebuild the losses in children’s learning. The Oxford English Dictionary (n.d.) defines intervention as “... ‘stepping in’, or interfering in any affair, so as to affect its course or issue” (Definition 1). This word implies that someone in a hierarchical position is stepping in to exercise authority over someone else. It implies expert knowing. While the Oxford English Dictionary continues, in Definition 1, to say that the term “intervention” is “now frequently applied to the interference of a state or government in the domestic affairs or foreign relations of another country,” the meaning of the term is reflective of a schoolcentric view in which power and authority are at play, where teachers wear a “badge of difference” (Memmi, 1965, p. 46), their professional degrees and certification that afford them expert status, and where formally defined curricula is privileged as the education that counts. Despite the perhaps good intentions, this schoolcentric approach is one that promotes intervention in order to “fix” children, parents, and families who are seen to be deficit, lesser in some way, not living up to the school’s agenda. How might moving away from a belief in and practice of an interventionist approach create space for strength-based inspiration, innovation, and change in approaches to schooling?

A Shift to Familycentric Schools

Returning to the notion of education as a birth-to-forever process, brings to mind an image of a newborn child nestled in the arms of a parent or family member. What words immediately come to mind for you as you think about the processes the family members will engage in to foster their child's ongoing development? Was "intervention" the first word that popped into your mind? I didn't think so. Were you drawn, instead, to verbs such as nurturing, care, love, support, encouragement? Families accompany their children through life as they grow and develop. In this same way, a "familycentric" (Pushor, 2015b) approach to schooling is a process of accompaniment (Green & Christian, 1998). It reflects a philosophy and pedagogy of "walking alongside" (Pushor, 2015b). In a familycentric approach, there is a belief in parents as holders of knowledge of children, teaching, and learning, knowledge different than the knowledge teachers hold, but complementary and just as important (Pushor, 2015a). As Darcy Hutchins (May 11, 2023), Director of Family, School and Community Partnerships for the Colorado Department of Education, stated so well in her keynote address at *Walk Alongside International: A Parent Engagement Think Tank* in Saskatoon, Saskatchewan, teachers have rich knowledge of *content*—of curricula, teaching and learning strategies, assessment practices—but parents have knowledge of *context*. They know their child's history, the people in their life, what makes them laugh and cry, the range of experiences they have lived, their culture, identity, and language. They can detail for teachers the 80% of the child's education that would otherwise be invisible on the school landscape. As teachers and administrators "walk alongside" parents in their lifelong work to educate their children, it is a process of "caring for" and "caring about" (Noddings, 2002) the children, the parents and families, and the education process in which home and school each play a part. It is in the intimacy of connection and relationship that there is possibility for truly getting to know one another, and for building programs and curriculum out of the fabric of families' lives.

This is a pivotal time in society. There is so much at stake. We can continue to talk and think about children and families in deficit terms such as "recovery" and "interventions," maintaining our sense of power, authority, and expert knowledge, or we can interrupt the taken-for-grantedness of a schoolcentric stance and come alongside families, all families, truly seeing and valuing their knowledge, assets, strengths, and hopes and dreams for their children and themselves.

A little bit of you, and a little bit of me.

In stories that we weave.

If you would walk with me. (Aglukark, 2022)

The time is ripe to take up a familycentric philosophy and pedagogy of "walking alongside."

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