Pedagogy at the Time of a Pandemic: A Reflective Report

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British Columbia's first case of COVID-19 was confirmed in January 2020, just as the four of us were beginning our work as part of a provincial network of early childhood pedagogists. In this reflective narrative, we engage with some of the pedagogical ideas we have been discussing during the time the novel coronavirus has emerged as a global crisis. Our purpose is to provide a glimpse of what we have been pondering as pedagogists in British Columbia at the time of a pandemic.

Delving into the concept of pedagogy, we have been walking alongside the writings of early childhood scholars Cristina Delgado Vintimilla and Veronica Pacini-Ketchabaw (forthcoming). Pedagogy, they argue, is attentive to the creation of a collective critical humanity—it asks, "What kind of world do we want to create?" In other words, it is concerned with subject formation and world transformation. Vintimilla and Pacini-Ketchabaw consider the provocative idea that pedagogy is an opportunity to create conditions for livable worlds—they ask, "How might we create conditions for living well with others, human and nonhuman?" Pedagogy is concerned, they say, not with answering questions, but with creating experiences and transforming educational practice by interrupting the status quo.

Vintimilla and Pacini-Ketchabaw's writings lead us to wonder about the world around us, consider the times in which we live, and think about what kinds of lives we want to create with educators and children. Because pedagogy demands we attend to the times in which we live, we are deeply engaged in thinking about how to respond to the conditions the current pandemic creates. Thus we ask: How might we read *COVID 19: Public Health Guidance for Childcare Settings* (Government of British Columbia, 2020; hereafter the guidelines) pedagogically? How might we create conditions that acknowledge the necessity of grappling with pedagogy while addressing the guidelines? How might we read the guidelines alongside the *BC Early Learning Framework* (Government of British Columbia, 2019), as a gathering or a space for invention? We have been thinking about the relationship between the guidelines and how they impact early childhood programs. For example, we are grappling with how to engage in physical distancing (as the guidelines state, "avoid[ing] close greetings, including hugs, handshakes, and regularly remind[ing] children to keep their hands to themselves") while reinventing what a community could become during a pandemic.

As we prepare to work with educators in their programs, we are considering how we might approach curriculum making in classrooms with the guidelines. Inspired by Vintimilla and Pacini-Ketchabaw, we are wondering about the pedagogical and curricular processes that we will activate to create "a space for making life" and livable worlds in the midst of so much turmoil. Although we do not pretend to have answers, we recognize the importance of having these evolving conversations with educators in their specific situated contexts. In other words, we accept the vulnerability of what an unbound curriculum might demand during a pandemic, and we are open to the pedagogical "possibilities for otherwise subjectivities and modes of relation" at a time of uncertainty (Vintimilla

& Pacini-Ketchabaw, forthcoming). We understand the inherent responsibility in creating curricula that unsettle the norms in early childhood classrooms at the present time.

The responsibility of curriculum making reminds us of another idea we have been wrestling with: how knowledge works. Dahlberg, Moss, and Pence (2007, p. 31) remind us that "knowledge not only shapes our understanding of the world by offering descriptions that we understand to be true. It also provides techniques of normalization." Thinking with the writings of philosopher Michel Foucault, Dahlberg and colleagues use the concept of normalization to problematize the processes that make an idea "normal" and "natural" in early childhood education. For example, child development has normalized what "shapes and directs our way of looking at and understanding the world" (Dahlberg et al., 2007, p. 31): predefined milestones that suggest we *know* who all children are and how they *should* develop, before an encounter even occurs. Processes of normalization also predetermine who an early childhood educator should be and how an educator should think and act. The problem with taking ideas for granted is that it leaves no room to think otherwise.

Returning to the guidelines, we are cautious about how they might normalize certain practices and curriculum processes in early childhood classrooms as they advise strategies and activities that are devoid of pedagogical intention. For instance, the guidelines advise creating games to keep children "two arm lengths apart" (p. 6). We are not disregarding the importance of the guidelines. We recognize the necessity for physical distancing; the health risks of COVID-19 are real and serious. However, we want to suggest that addressing physical distancing needs to be embedded within rich pedagogical processes already going on in classrooms. Games have a place in early childhood education, but only when they are pedagogically connected to the curriculum that is being carefully crafted by educators with children. Because early childhood education "is not primarily a technical endeavour (of standards and indicators, measurement and management) but a political endeavour about meanings, purposes, values and ethics" (Moss & Urban, 2020, p. 5), games cannot be included as a means to an end. As pedagogists, we view this intersection between the guidelines and curriculum as a time to ask "How might we create pedagogical processes that ensure that children think of physical distance as a way of creating community during a pandemic?"

Pedagogy requires us to confront and question predetermined curricula and to invent pedagogies that are a continuum of experiences related to our lives and not diluted by techniques that normalize practices. Our pedagogical suggestions encourage children to participate in creating the conditions that are necessary for everyone to live well during a pandemic. As pedagogists, our challenge for the next few months is to attend to the realities the pandemic demands (e.g., the importance of physical distancing and hygiene) *while at the same time* co-creating pedagogical trajectories that orient toward sustainable futures and a life attuned to possibilities. We look forward to the intricate tasks of envisioning, with educators, pedagogical projects that respond to the times in which we live, as we co-construct curriculum that consistently provokes us to question and consider what conditions we might create, and for what kinds of worlds?

References

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