

How do we talk about COVID with students?

So how do we create space in our classrooms to support students in talking about COVID? And I actually counted, I only think the word COVID was as mentioned once or twice in all three of you. And that was, I think, intentional, but we want to look at that question as well as, what are other ways that we suggest that we engage them to connect with their thoughts and feelings about this pandemic as they return to school.

Yes, of course you have to talk about it and talk about COVID and how they're feeling. But I think you want to use the assumption of not just focusing on like... So if you're very stressed, don't assume all of your students are very stressed. Don't automatically assume, you want to use a positive framing of it, I'd love to hear what Linda and Monique say. I'm just going to talk about, there was a study done and I talked to some colleagues in Israel during lockdown, where they were doing the Middle Years Development Instrument actually in Hebrew, that's a measure of child wellbeing, and they ask kids how they felt during the lockdown and things like that.

And what was fascinating is the kids had mostly positive comments to say, and these weren't the most vulnerable ones, but they said, "We got to sleep later. We got to spend and have more meals with our parents, which we liked, and we weren't rushing off to things like that. We got to meet our teachers in a different way." They got to connect with their teachers in a different way and felt new connections and the one negative thing that came up, repeatedly, was they fought more with their siblings while they were home.

Other people who have kids at home know that that's something that happens when the kids are home all the time. So I think for me is to start with something positive, what were some positive things that you did during that time that you want to keep in your life? I know for me, I'll just mention, for me, that the not so much travel and more dinner time meals with my family was just the gift for me that I want to maintain now. I got that taste of it and I want to continue it.

I was talking to my little grandson and I said, "So how are you doing? Are you looking forward to going back to school?" And he said, "Well, nana, I'm a little worried about COVID, but I'm more really, really worried about the boy that bullies me." Their priorities are so different. And yeah, there is concern, so I think it goes back to that validating what they bring up, validating what they're showing, right? And sometimes they're not really focused on this, it's more just watching their nonverbals and seeing who is kind of overwhelmed and who isn't.

I would just add briefly that I think it provides us an opportunity to reflect on what are the rites of passage that this system we call education provides for children and families, and how do we honor that? I think about graduation last year and potentially this year, about those little people starting kindergarten, that is a rite of passage. Those who are transitioning into a new school, whether it be middle or high school, that is also a rite of passage.

Those graduating, those of you who are teaching for your first year, those of you were teaching a new grade, those of you who are in your last year of contributing in this way, it's all a rite of passage. And in those rites of passage, there is transformation. And so I think that's the part of the pause is, what do we want that transformation to look like? And how do we make sure that it really upholds the dignity of those who are serving and ourselves?

How do you differentiate between addressing COVID with students and with adults?

How do you differentiate between the ways in which you might create space for students and adults? What would you say is, just really quickly, some sort of key differentiators, because you all sort of spoke to the fact that this is not just an issue for our children, it's an issue for everybody. So are there some ideas that you think of in terms of differentiating between the two?

Just, having a colleague or having a staff member who's just observing, we're trying to be preventative proactive, and staying one step ahead of big issues or our big, overwhelmed upsets. So just seeing when someone looks afraid, seeing when someone is shut down, that we're just observing each other a little better, maybe connecting a little better. I don't know. What do you think Kim and Monique?

I don't think that we were speaking just to the littler citizens, I think we were speaking to all of them and for me, maybe because my kids are going into grade 12, I feel a little more heightened concern about the high school and middle year students when there's so much happening for them in lots of ways. So yeah, I think that concern goes across all the grades and for sure those working in education and community wellness. I don't think we need to box; I think it is a blanket let's wrap blankets around everybody and say, how do we care for you? And how do we have a reciprocal relationship of caring for each other?

And I agree all you said. And I think the thing is it's about intention and I agree. So first of all, it's about everyone, all the adults in the building, all the children, and I think that in some ways, we might be focusing more on the little ones because their behavior is kind of out there calling our attention. Whereas sometimes their older kids maybe look more quiet because they can hide those feelings and look like everything's okay when it's not. So I think we have to, I think, put especially as Monique you were saying, those transitional times, which are so important at both the rites of passage, but the transitions. And we have to recognize the loss of some of those and how it's an opportunity. So I actually think sometimes I, can I tell you my greatest fear? Is that people are going to go back to school and it's going to business as usual.

It's going to be like, hit the curriculum, let's get it. Now we have, I know some districts are doing like two classes in 10 weeks and teachers are going to feel like I have to get through all my curriculum now, and they're just going to focus curriculum, curriculum, curriculum. First of all, the teachers are going to be stressed, so when you're stressed, you're not present. You don't see people's pains. You can't behave compassionately because you're yourself on self-preservation and focused on yourself. So first, we need to think about the teachers, how are those administrators going to support the teachers? How is the district going to support the teacher's wellbeing?

I'll say, every school needs to think about what are they doing, first and foremost, for the adults in intentional ways. Are there going to be times where we're during their planning, where usually you'd say, I don't know, you can't leave the building and say, "No." During your planning, you have to go for a walk. You could go with a colleague, what are we going to do in staff rooms to show gratitude and appreciation? What are we going to do to feed, support the adults? And it has to be done, it's just so critical. I actually think that everybody, you have a physical health and safety plan as you head back, and you have someone who's overseeing all that. You need to have the same level, a wellness and thriving and flourishing plan with someone, with a group focused on that as well.

How do we help teachers practice self-care?

How do we actually help our teachers to practice self-care? And so some sort of your best tips around that, especially understanding that this is a pretty busy time for teachers. They don't have the time they may have had a month ago, so what would you say are your one or two ideas for them to think about in terms of self-care?

Well, this is interesting, isn't it? Because everybody has a different way of defining that, right? And a lot of times, what is stressing out educators right now that I've talked to, sometimes it's always been at a systems level, but also just the idea of not enough time. Because right now this is so much work for educators, is just a ton of work, it's just huge. So I think, it's what works for each person like in little moments of the day, is that what we're trying to get to? Because all of us know when I talk secondary trauma as like, it's not about eating green leafy vegetables and going to the gym. This is about those moments of peace, those moments where you can just have a little bit of quiet just to be present, to be as present as you can. But it's not for anyone on the outside to define what self-care would look like because everybody does it different, for sure.

I would add only to drink water. Limit your caffeine, not take it out away, but limit it, and the other one get outside as, absolutely, much as possible. Especially, even on a light cloudy day, but on a sunny day, when that sun hits your eyelids, it releases vitamin D, which releases serotonin, which is why you feel so good. So that would be my two pieces, and do the same with your students, make sure that they've got water or warm tea. If you can grow your own tea in your school or your community and have the students harvest it and make tea that they drink when they come in every day. Welcome them, make their coming to your place like a ceremony like, we're so happy you're here. And in order to do that, you have to take care of you as well.

And I think we, as citizens in this province, have to also take care of you as educators. Send you notes of thank you, send you say, I'm here if you need to talk about anything, I'm here, I can debrief with you. I'm here. I feel for you working in education and anything I can do to be of support, please let me know. Because you're like the aunties and the uncles and the grandparents who are helping raise up our generations. And anything I can do, please yeah, let me know. And I know that I am not the only citizen with that viewpoint.

What can we do to honor ceremony given the current challenges?

What can we do to nurture and develop and honor ceremony in our families, classrooms and communities given the current challenges around coming together? And these might be things that get lost in the shuffle of our current time. So talk a little bit more about ceremony.

Well, I can only talk from my perspective, right? Each of you who are with us today, you are on territory, you have hopefully people coming into your schools, you have connections with the local nations that you can ask these questions of. Thank you, Denise, for that question. I think the perspective of even having this conversation with students about ceremony around, how do we create, in many ways, a sacred space in our classroom or in our schools so that there is a responsibility for students to care for each other and to care for the space and to care for their teachers, like they would an aunt or an uncle or a grandparent.

And I don't think it's my place to say what ceremonies happen, but to have that mindset. For me and my teaching, ceremony is about respect, it's about holding people up, it's about laughter, it's about love and

it's about making whatever is unfolding in this moment, sacred and important. And that we just drop down into that space of saying, "Let's just pause and honor what's happening here right now."

So for me, that's ceremony, and it looks very different in many communities and in different teachings. And it goes back to, I think, what we were talking about is, that if you jump right in and say, "Here's the curriculum we have to cover and principals and vice principals and superintendents, please hear this." That the curriculum is not going to happen, if you do not take care of your students and your staff's emotional, mental and physical and spiritual needs, first. It's not going to happen.

You're going to see a decrease in graduation rates. You're going to see a decrease in all grades, if you do not take care of the social and emotional wellness of those who are really in our hands. And part of that is ceremony, the slowing down of the honoring, the being present and acknowledging the beauty of what is unfolding in the moment. So thank you Denise for that question. And I'd love to hear also other people speak in communities around the importance of ceremony and educating hearts and minds.

I love the idea of even the ceremony of starting the school year and thinking how we're going to start it differently this year. And I just want to emphasize your point, Monique, and yours as well as Linda, is this idea of, you cannot learn, you cannot be present if you're stressed. And I'll tell you the biology of that is basically our stress system, our medulla, part of our brain that goes into the fight or flight or freeze when you're stressed, it's our survival mode. And what it means is that we become focused on one thing, which is survival and we cannot learn.

Our prefrontal cortex, which is our part for working, memory, cognitive control and so on, that executive functions cannot function. And so teachers, if they go in right away, start teaching curriculum, when we haven't helped regulate that stress system through, to me, which is about ceremony, which is about connecting, which is about acknowledging and being present, you're absolutely right, the kids will not learn. There'll be reduced graduations rates. There's going to be so much.

So I just want to emphasize that so much that this now is the time like no other, with COVID, I've mentioned that, with the pandemic, where it is a different time. And can I just say an opportunity for actually reinventing education, which it should be, have been for a long time, because it has been around since the turn of the last century with the industrialization and the sort of assembly line. We now have this opportunity to think about, if we put relationships and connection at the core of education, what will happen? Anyway, hopefully we can see that experiment unfold here.

How do we talk about the children who have not returned to the classroom?

How do we talk to children in the classroom about those children who do not return? Should we create a space for conversation on how to connect with the students who are not physically present? And I know this is a unique situation that probably we haven't faced before, so how do you sort of deal with that?

If we talk about community and a citizen and how do we make those connections, I think that everyone needs to feel part of that community, whether they're present or not, like physically present or virtually present. And actually, I have to say, and I'd love to hear what Linda and Monique as well, but I do believe that when you ask kids what they want, they kind of come up with really good ideas. If I had some kids in the class and said, "Well, Johnny and Emily and others are learning from home, what are

some ways we can make them feel part of the group?" They would come up with brilliant ideas that just might...

Of for sure they would, you bet.

Yeah. And I think also that it's a beautiful opportunity to share with people that we all have choice. We have choice, our families have choice and it's an incredibly powerful life lesson to make choice for what is best for you and for your family. And there's not a right way and there's not a wrong way, it is about personal choice. And if we come out of this with anything, that we're raising citizens that can make a choice based on what they want and what they feel safe and how they will thrive, we're ahead of the game.

How do we set up a classroom from a wellbeing perspective?

There's a lot of information out there about how to set up a classroom from a safety perspective, whether it's plexiglass or whatever hand sanitizers in the right place, but what tips would you have for setting up a classroom from a wellbeing perspective? Even in terms of the physical space, knowing the challenges the teachers are facing right now, is there anything that you would add, just the little things about how do they make their space a bit more of a focus on wellbeing, as opposed to simply safety?

For me, number one, because I did this with my students when I was a teacher in middle school, but you can just have students have a hand in how you organize the space. So give them the ideas and say, "How do we create a sense of community and caring and support for each other? How should the desks...?" I can imagine the kids even saying like, "And we should bring in some plants, so we have the outdoors indoors. We should bring in..." So have them actually help create it and get to choose what they think it would be.

So I think that that would be so much first and foremost, and even the little ones, they can do it. And to me, I automatically go to a circle of a way that we have that there's maybe even, Linda, I'm going to you to think about... There'd even be a place in the room that's kind of a, I'm going to call, the comm corner or someplace where we can go and have a rest, but if we need a bit of a brain break or we need something for us, yeah, I just feel like I'm really thinking of how we create that sort of love, how it looks like love when you walk in that classroom.

And I think we have so many amazing educators, because I've run into them just traveling to so many schools over the last, I don't know, nine, 10 years, is like their ability to share their ideas. Because we have the most amazing ACEs informed educators in BC and just that mentorship to new educators, because I have a lot of concerns for the new teachers right now and they need our veteran teachers helping them along the way. But there's so many creative ideas, it's just how do we get people to share them?

I was in a class at View Royal, Mrs. Morgan Michael, beautiful, and what she had done was she had taken turquoise paper and put it on all the walls around the room. The students were in like a U shape, and then she had a couple of the salt lamps in the room, and so as soon as I walked into that room, I was like. So there's lots of little things that we can do to alter just the feeling in the room no matter whether we're in COVID or other times. But to think about that, I think for teachers, if you were walking in, what would calm you every day you walk into the space where you are serving? Because if you're, just like Kim and Linda said, if you're calm, then that will ripple to the students.