

Storytelling Through Outdoor Exploration supported by Digital Learning

By

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ABSTRACT

The COVID-19 pandemic has impacted student learning in various ways such as intensifying the connected society where most of our lives are lived online, documented, and uploaded in the digital world. The ways that young learners access information and consume media, raises important concerns. Evidence indicates that this screen time leads to students spending less time outside even though outdoor learning is shown to improve learning and overall well-being. This paper discusses if and how teachers could support students in their outdoor learning projects by using the tools offered through distance online learning. I examine how students are affected by online learning, particularly regarding emotional well-being and mental health. The research questions are: How can teachers support students in their outdoor learning projects through storytelling with the use of online learning tools? What are the implications for student emotional well-being? The methods are 1) a review of relevant literatures to determine gaps and themes, and 2) my field notes based on my observations of student learning and written work. My personal observations clarify and engage with the literature themes. During the COVID-19 pandemic, I was teaching 20 children in grades 7-10 over 9 months. They completed various written pieces such as end of year projects, journal entries, and reflection questions. The findings from both the literature and my observations highlight a need for better integration of technology as a tool to support learning and teaching practices. The findings suggest that this generation of children has perpetuated an evolution of self-expression through online platforms. The observations provided a snapshot of the students online learning and emotional well-being and suggest that without support from an adult there can arise anxiety, depression, and other challenges can arise. Implications for online learning that supports student well-being are presented; the reflections and observations suggest that students were able to gain a sense of identity through telling their story and sharing it with others. However, the importance of the ways in which students interact with each other while learning has often been missed or overlooked in the literature. The educator's role is constantly changing. Both literature and observations suggest that teachers can use online tools to support the outdoor learning projects of students if they attend to practices that allow for autonomy. A flexible timeline in which students could organize their projects, including a due date that suits

their schedule and/or scheduling extra or optional help sessions after school would help students to take initiative of their own learning. To help facilitate the observations around distance learning and student wellbeing, an in-depth examination of the current literature is offered to contextualize my findings.

FOREWORD

Since the beginning of the Master in Environmental Studies (MES) Program, my research had become a beautifully intertwined web that constantly forged new paths from old ones, and eventually circled back to where I started. When I tried to imagine the direction of education, it meant that I needed to prepare students with the necessary skills and provide them with the context that would allow them to see how they can transfer these skills. I never thought distance learning could become a potential permanent way of teaching. Understanding that there is never a one-size-fits-all teaching method and reforging my teaching philosophy to include educating students on how to be resilient in the face of adversity, became a priority. The inter-disciplinary approach of the MES program enabled me to merge storytelling as pedagogy, implement strategies for coping with mental well-being, and structure/organize my learning to achieve my goal. I pursued this dedication through self-directed studies, experiential learning, and course work. Part of the requirements for the MES program was to conduct original research in an area of interest. With regards to the data collection and analysis, given the restrictions during this COVID pandemic period, I was unable to conduct formal research with participants. I therefore conducted a thorough literature review and kept a record of my observations to look for main themes.

This Major Research Paper (MRP) draws attention to the relationship between Environmental Education and outdoor learning as a proposed teaching tool to improve a student's mental health and well-being. Many teachers and educators avoid using the term "mental health" as it is often associated with mental illness (Fox et al., 2019). As teachers, we can say that if students are experiencing positive emotional well-being, then they are dealing with good mental health. Virtual learning inevitably decreased engagement and stunted relationship-building and feelings of positivity. Even though the terms "emotional well-being"

and “mental health” should be used interchangeably (Fox et al., 2019), when discussing my students’ behaviours using those three key areas, the term *emotional well-being* will be used instead of *mental health*. I draw attention to the ways in which storytelling and a writer’s notebooks can be effective tools for teachers to use as a way of amplifying student voices. The desire to reconnect with one another, through social interaction, has been different through online platforms. Their minds and bodies needed to remain stationary for a considerable amount of time and although this stasis was an exhaustive period for most -- our emotional well-being. When normality and usual school schedules disappeared, it forced most of us to put everything into perspective. This paper will act as a starting point for further research and discussion since we need to develop a better environment to foster a growth mindset and support student well-being. The key topics explored in this paper include, but not limited to remote learning, mental health (emotional well-being) and outdoor education. By examining this literature, I quickly learned how online learning limits opportunities to foster outdoor education project and I focus on the types of opportunities that teachers can present to their students that offer further engagement and self-discovery. I have found that these opportunities expose the raw, unedited versions of ourselves that, if we are brave enough to unveil, can render those experiences into words. Furthermore, this MRP will satisfy the final requirement for the master’s degree in Environmental Studies as well as the Graduate Diploma in Environmental Sustainability Education.

DEDICATION

This paper is dedicated to all my students who have reminded me that conversations at the lockers, the ones that happen in the margins, are the ones that matter the most.

“They were busy doing the covert work children do at night: the multiplication of cells, the silent, unstoppable growth, the hatching of private plans.”

- Heather Harpham

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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

Before the COVID-19 pandemic, online communication and social media has exponentially gained traction with regards to its effect on student's mental health. The fact is that the increased exposure to computer and smartphone screens resulted in an early burnout from overwhelming exhaustion, feelings of cynicism, and detachment (Mheidly et al., 2020). This paper first outlines the background and current state of our education system as we traverse through the COVID-19 pandemic. I then describe the processes via the inordinate changes that all educators, students, and parents were forced to transition to. The last section compiles the main findings of the reflection pieces from my students as well as a discussion of the implementation of digital storytelling and outdoor learning projects to promote student voices. This paper explores these and other key learnings from student reflection and offers suggestions for others hoping to integrate digital storytelling and outdoor learning projects into their practices.

1.1 BACKGROUND and CONTEXT My teaching experience is reflected through working with the York Region District School Board (YRDSB). All the policies, notifications and announcements discussed in this paper are strictly from the YRDSB and by no means a reflection of all school boards. The board updates teachers, students, and parents when necessary. The timeline and observations for this paper took place from March 2020 – June 2021. Before the pandemic hit, I was offered a long term occasional (LTO) position in a Grade 7/8 homeroom class. My initial and intended research methodology would have required select students to complete an initial survey outlining their thoughts about online learning. Once the preliminary data was gathered, students would have an opportunity to discuss their responses in detail and be invited to speak further on a podcast to be shared with teachers. This would have provided me with concrete data and a baseline of how the learners' overall attitude was with regards to online learning. Both students and parents would have needed to sign a consent form authorizing me to conduct research within and outside of the classroom. However, due to unforeseen circumstances, York Region District School Board (YRDSB) stopped all external research applications and thus no research was allowed to be conducted. Given the

restrictions, I was unable to conduct formal research with the participants. Instead, anecdotal, and observational field notes were compiled during my teaching hours. However, by being able to connect with students in a casual setting, like the virtual classroom, I came to understand these students on a deeper level. These conversations seemed to happen organically when I saw students struggle with understanding material online without direct support from their peers and teachers. During these observations of the conversations with students, I realized that there were major gaps happening because of the pandemic. In many cases, these gaps that I observed were also reflected in the literature. For systemic changes to take place, there needs to be a space for all voices to be heard. We need to acknowledge the dialogues we have with youth, as the conversations that ensue are the ones that matter the most.

Traditional education is built for the needs of the masses; it is built for students who can (Pierson, 2013). When we start to think about how we can create spaces that are different and that can cater to all students with a variety of different needs, we can see all students succeed. Storytelling is more than just written words, it can be expressed through art, music, dance etc... With this generation of digital natives, (Makoe, 2012), we are seeing an evolution of self-expression through social media. During this time of the COVID pandemic, we have seen the complete reliance on technology for distance learning (Makoe, 2012) as well as the push for teaching practices to be taken outdoors and on the land. At the beginning of quarantine in March 2020, teachers needed to adhere to the Ontario Ministry of Education safety guidelines. Thus, there was a forced transition from teaching in the classroom to outdoor spaces, such as outdoor tents. With this transition, social distancing was made easier, poorly ventilated classrooms were no longer a priority, and students were able to settle into a new routine that reflected all these changes. Considering recent events, the priority in school has been addressing mental health issues before academic ones. Incorporating issues that focus on environmental and social justice would work seamlessly to reconnect students and rebuild our community. The silver lining in all of this is that people have been craving to reconnect with others since the beginning stages of quarantine in March 2020. The need to do so will initiate tremendous avenues through online spaces to have these conversations again. Learning is never linear; in fact, for learners to articulate their thought processes successfully, they should

be able to move freely, forwards, and backwards to achieve this. (Simpson, 2014). Teachers are now faced with the task of creating engaging material, keeping in mind that attention spans dwindle faster than teaching on screen. Maintaining learners' attention on screen has proved to be quite difficult, especially with younger learners and educators who are not as rehearsed with technology as others. The struggle for many educators this year has been learning to deliver information in bite-sized pieces as the burden of immense screen time played a role in mental fatigue.

With respect to the elementary division, students were not presented with blended learning (learning that combined classroom and virtual learning); this was used as a model for secondary schools. At the beginning of the year, students needed to opt for classroom learning or virtual learning that would be delivered in full online. Some students have spent the full year learning virtually as part of the Elementary Virtual School. Unfortunately, my position consisted of in-person learning that transitioned to virtual learning so I will be unable to speak with respect to learning fully online. The abrupt transition to remote learning meant that everything done on paper needed to be uploaded to an online platform. Currently, students were working on a variety of different writing projects such as nature journals and writer's notebooks. Nature journals, writer's notebooks as well as digital storytelling, are types of media in which students can produce content that is purposeful. Storytelling specifically evokes empathy, elicit emotional responses and connecting with those moments can show that we are incredibly human. It is the type of responses that are not measured with a checklist or a rubric. It is part of the foster the individual as a whole and nurturing them through a holistic approach. The ability to be able to communicate with one another in a respectful manner, seems to be lost in translation. As teachers, we are mindful of sanitizing certain conversations but in what ways can we allow for tougher conversations to happen? During this time, we must be reminded that we are not teaching students, but individuals. A holistic approach allows teachers to foster the whole individual; this is integral to the developmental needs, both socially and emotionally. Writing became this therapeutic release where students began to see themselves as storytellers, not just learners; their path to understanding who they wanted to be in this world, became much clearer. They were able to recognize their own perspectives reflected in

mainstream culture and media and that brought comfort to those who felt like they did not fit in.

1.2 METHODOLOGY Given the inability to conduct a research ethics review with the YRDSB, I made a pivot in my methods to 1) literature reviews, and 2) personal observations written in field notes. The field notes and observations from face-to-face and online teaching, occurred between March 2020 and June 2021. The process of selecting the literature through Google Scholar provided a general overview of the current literature. As I filtered the articles noting the major keywords, I used York's Library database to hone in on specific data that linked online learning to its effects on mental health. The initial review started with 10 publications from 2019 – 2021 whose title contained the term 'remote learning' or 'distance learning' which responded also to descriptors with 'COVID-19' and 'stress'. Just a preliminary search of the key words provided a sense of what has been missed or overlooked in the literature. There I only found 20 published papers. Carrillo and Flores (2020), argue that the period of change entails the necessity to provide an evidence-based perspective on what works and does not work, but most importantly, to understand the characteristics, the processes, the outcomes, and the implications of online practices. To understand the impacts of distance learning on a student's emotional well-being and outdoor learning, studies should be conducted over a longer period. Finally, my methods also included a review literature relating to past and current distance educational practices. As mentioned previously, there was an initial search that was conducted to reflect the current practices done around the abrupt remote teaching that incurred. Keywords such as: asynchronous/synchronous, virtual learning, online learning, and distance education. This provided me with a baseline of what models' school boards were using and the effectiveness of these practices. As I began to gather a list of sources, I used the York Region District School Board website and my experience working with the board to build a connection.

My original intended methodology had called for individual student interviews that would allow my students to explore conversations about emotional well-being as well as their current view on their schooling. In this case, formal research was unable to be conducted due

to the restrictions of COVID-19. I was unable to have a structured and recorded conversation about this topic because I was unable to get permission to do so. There are several instances per week, where I have had conversations with these students, in groups, as well as one-one, about screen time, outdoor projects, and their overall well-being; I kept field notes of these. Prior to transitioning to virtual learning, I took field notes by jotting in between classes to record how my students were feeling that day and recorded changes to their overall attitude. I wanted to observe any change of behaviour between learning in-person versus learning virtually. I filled a small notebook that documented overall changes, the class and of academic struggles for 4 of my students. My observations of student responses of are documented and analyzed in this paper. Near the end of the school year, students were given a project that asked them to create a timeline and reflect on the main events that occurred over the year. Some of the main events students chose to write about included but were not limited to a death in the family, missed holidays and celebrations, extracurricular activities as well as parents who lost their job due to COVID-19. Students were invited to create a timeline (digitally or handwritten) that reflected on at least five major events or moments that they remember since the beginning of quarantine in 2020. If students did not remember the date, they were asked to provide a period in which the event could have potentially occurred. Being mindful that every individual experienced this year differently, there was a reminder that if students were not comfortable talking about events that occurred, they could supplement the assignment with a journey entry. Every one of my students participated in the project and some even volunteered to share their experiences. Explicit instruction was not given that would prompt a student to record negative experiences, but only a handful of students chose to include positive changes they noticed. Some students mentioned fun projects they did, how they got better at navigating technology and how there was more time spent with their families. Despite the social challenges that COVID brought, I observed one of my students trying to step outside her comfort zone by reaching out to peers and asking if they how they were doing. I felt that it was important to remind students that even though we went through uncertainty, we needed to talk about the pillar in our lives that supported us. Not only were students invited to list these events, but they were also encouraged to write about their

emotional state in that moment. Most of the responses in this paper are from my observations of that student project.

CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW AND MAIN THEMES

This chapter provides a review of the literature that examines the challenges both teachers and students must face, and how collectively, we can create smaller communities that help us to strength those relationships that were bound by COVID-19. There are four main themes covered, 1) what has changed during the pandemic, 2) student emotional well-being, 3) re-defining the role of the teacher and 3) re-defining the curriculum. In each of these themes from the literature, I also provide examples from my own observations as a teacher to illuminate and speak to each theme.

2.1 WHAT HAS CHANGED IN ONLINE LEARNING DURING COVID? As a member of the York Region District School Board (YRDSB), we receive updates from the Ontario Ministry of Education with regards to the any of the changes from public health for educators. This year, it was evident that teachers needed to prioritize the needs of a student’s well-being by creating an environment that not only supports academic growth but personal ones as well. The stress of constantly changing from virtual learning back to face-to-face left many students, teachers and staff overwhelmed. As we are coming to terms with a new way of teaching, and learning under the pandemic health regulations, it is important that students are given a space to have a conversation about their personal learning journeys through this pandemic. Youth are widely underserved in the media. Having them advocate for change meant that we needed to demolish old systems. By allowing students to tackle a topic relative to what social norms are, there is a ripple of social impact that can be created. When we give youth the opportunities to produce media that addresses issues like climate change, we can shine a light to the voices that we rarely hear from. Uploading and sharing them on digital platforms can be widely accessible to the public. Many youth activists like Greta Thunberg, Autumn Peltier, and others, have inspired change in a world where youth voices are often out of focus. It invites participation, a critical aspect of the development of citizenship, empowerment, and well-being of youth

(Tilleczek, 2016). They have helped to redefine their generation's role in our political and social justice systems that allow adults to see youth as an agent of change, rather than rebellious individuals. Every single day, we engage in conversations with our students, some in passing and others that are encouraged. It would be a wasted opportunity if educators did not take this as an approach to encourage dialogic teaching.

Dialogic teaching encourages teachers to develop professional capabilities to first recognize, then harness the power of talk for reflective learning (Simpson, 2016). This approach should widely be vetted as a teaching method, as it can further extend conversations. Wade (1995) argues that empowerment consists of constructing new meanings through reflection and experience as well as having the freedom to choose new ways of responding to the world (p. 340). If we engage these youth in our current debates, it will allow them to envision themselves in a world where their voice matters. Although, engaging in this kind of teaching may leave the dialogue open to rejection and discrimination. When we allow our youth into the conversations where sweeping change can occur, it opens it up to all sorts of criticisms and opinions from adults. I think that most of us work to please others and avoid conflict as it seems to be a safe route to take. For a long time, mainstream schooling instilled this idea that students should listen and behave in a way that is socially acceptable. But subduing the natural inquisitive nature of these students, we are depriving them of the chance to create real change in our world. Adam Grant (2017, pg.23) said it best, "As they [youth] question traditions and challenge the status quo, they may appear bold and self-assured on the surface. But when you peel back the layers, the truth is that they, too, grapple with fear, ambivalence and self-doubt."

2.2 STUDENT WELL-BEING AND MENTAL HEALTH In March of 2020, the Ontario Government made an announcement stating that all publicly funded schools would be closed for two weeks due to the novel coronavirus (COVID-19) outbreak. Following the announcement, Ontario launched fully virtual learning for students at home during the pandemic. It was previously reported that full online learning offers a sense of unreality, and it largely depends on the student's commitment to the courses. (Amir et al., 2020). This led to uncertainty with how virtual learning would impact students' well-being and academic success

in the long run. Providing the necessary technology for students as well as staff who do not have access to a computer or reliable internet services immediately became a priority. Parents who worked at home or had full-time jobs elsewhere needed to find extended daycare or more concrete solutions to manage both work and their kids. The transition to an online model left all parties in a period of distress with how to operate the day-to-day. As a master's student myself, I had no control over how the quality of my education would be affected, much less for those students transitioning into high school and post-secondary. The unpredictability eventually led to resistance because the structure that students were so used to, was changing. Students did not reach out for help, they submitted assignments late or incomplete and participated less in group work. This led to an increased interest in supporting students with their emotional well-being.

When I had conversations with parents during this transition, their choice between either virtual or face-to-face school became dependent on the student's emotional well-being as well as their academic standing. The terms "emotional well-being" and "mental health" should be used interchangeably (Fox et al., 2019). Emotional well-being usually emphasizes positive concepts such as resilience and a positive self-concept; for students who have a positive sense of well-being this "enables the individual to function in a society and meet the demands of everyday life." (Fox et al., 2019, p.16). The World Health Organization (WHO) defines mental health as a "state of well-being in which every individual recognizes his or her own potential and can cope with the normal stresses of life" (2004). When working directly with the students and discussing strategies to help them improve their well-being, it is important to note that the term mental health will be used when referring to a developmental nature. This is to say that the factors that affect a student's emotional well-being can potentially lead to mental health problems.

Many of my students struggled with performance anxiety and thus hindering their ability to participate in class discussions even though their comprehension skills were quite high. On the other hand, certain students excelled with online performance as they were more self-regulated, independent, and confident in their abilities, than their counterparts. In the face of the pandemic, children are one of the most vulnerable populations likely to experience long-

term consequences from COVID-19 (Henderson et al., 2020). There was a visible loss of community support, friends, and routines that students now needed to face in addition to their academic struggles. The transition itself, presented unavoidable losses that prevented students to thrive in their schooling. The COVID-19 experience is different for everyone; therefore, it is important that teachers exercise caution when it comes having conversations around what is happening globally.

Based on current trends, there is consistent evidence that the COVID-19 crisis may be having a significant impact on the psychological health of adolescents across the globe (Magson et al, 2021). With many students having to face the unfortunate repercussions as the potential quality of their academics might be shortened, there was a relationship between fear of failure and anxiety. This presented in ways such as disengagement in class participation, late assignments, and unresponsiveness to online discussions. A study conducted by Hasan and Bao (2020) reported that there was a positive association between ‘fear of academic year loss’ and psychological distress” (p.5). As the term progressed, it became evident that students were regressing both academically and socially because their routine had abruptly changed. There was one instance in talking with a student, I could tell that he was very tired and stressed because he put a lot of pressure on himself to get all the work done. He would be transitioning in secondary school and knew how important it was to learn to stay organized and prioritize work. At this age, 12-13, students can respond to their peers appropriately and provide comfort and support. I could see that they would encourage each other and try to stay positive. Mentally struggling and feeling overwhelmed can exhaust all parts of our brains, so there needs to be a distraction that allows us to momentarily take breaks and reset.

The classroom strategies are focused on the three key areas of emotional well-being: engagement, relationships and feeling positive” (Fox et al, 2019, p.29). Online teaching is one of the more promising alternatives to learning in a pandemic; students show a negative perception of online learning behaviour because there is a lack of social engagement (Hasan & Bao, 2020). However, what is striking in the literature in relation to online learning, is the acknowledgement of the ways in which the affective domains (emotions, feelings, and moods) impact on the various aspects of online experiences (Jones et. 2019). Not only do students bring

their own emotions to the online environment, but they also must interpret and understand those of others without the use of non-verbal cues and deal with the emotions generated by this. Some of my students are on an Independent Education Plan (IEP), which is paperwork that outlines any exceptionalities, lists any accommodations or modifications, defines strengths and weakness, and is discussed with parents, teachers, and administrators. When speaking to these students, the lack of one-on-one support or individualized programming which they would normally receive in person, became hard to implement. One of my students who struggle with test anxiety found that online tests were less stressful because he was not concerned about seeing other students finish faster than him. There were moments where I felt that online teaching or delivering material online seemed to be working for some students, just not all. Another one of my students became very aware of the fact that marks in grade 9 would not count towards University and College admissions. There was a lack of effort on her part because she said most of the work that she was given was simply review from before quarantine. It was tough to change her perspective and attitude towards schooling at that point because her teacher knew that if she pushed her any further, her mental state would decline. When it came down to it, many of my student's academics ultimately suffered because it seemed like there was a constant reminder that what they were doing did not really matter. There was already an assumed leniency because of the changes, and I knew my students felt the brunt of that. They chose to discount their efforts even further. We discussed healthy ways to cope with stress such as journaling thoughts, drawing and writing fiction as part of this escape. Creative writing was part of seeing a bigger picture. I had many students demonstrate their writing skills through simple journaling pieces and it became my job to provide constant feedback on how to improve on their writing. I struggled with learning how to effectively grade the creating writing efforts of my students because it was all subjective; I was reading something that was not measured by academic intelligence alone. In fact, we needed things that could not be measured. When students head into the work force, their success is not quantified with a rubric. Understanding a concept is one thing but learning how to apply it is another; their communication skills, problem solving, and thinking would allow them to function as a productive member of society. Important. But prioritizing schedules and learning

how to meet deadlines without burning out or communicating with their colleagues when there is a difference of opinion. As much as learning the foundations of writing are important, allowing one to communicate what is not written is just as important. Many of my students struggle with learning how to translate our thoughts onto paper. In my experience, so much of what makes sense in our minds are often lost in translation the moment we try to communicate that on paper. Daily, teachers are constantly looking for opportunities for students to practice these skills. Seamlessly weaving between individual projects to group consolidations can allow for just that. A sizeable number, around 80%, of my observations included negative comments about how online learning has affected the students' learning experiences because of the lack of social engagement. Normally as the lesson wraps up, students are free to chit-chat. But with virtual, many of my students feel as though once they leave the Google Meet session, no conversations would happen as everyone has gone offline. For those who used to walk home with their peers or played basketball after the bell rang, missed out on those small social interactions that they so desperately needed. It meant that teachers needed to find a space to replicate those conversations that normally happen in the hallways.

Through facilitated social connections, students are supported because there is no right or wrong way of telling a story. Thomas King famously stated, “the truth about stories is that that’s all we are” (2) means that when we strip down to the very cellular makeup of a story, there is one that is unique to everyone. The pressure of constantly needing validation, checkmarks or even a simple high five, can be rather taxing for students who need that constantly but do not receive it. As such, students who showed anxious behaviours before transitioning to remote learning, required extra support to navigate through the academic and social realms of schooling. The flexibility of asynchronous learning allowed students to practice autonomy, and to navigate their learning at their own pace. Based on my observations, I could see that only a handful of my students preferred learning online. They were the ones that preferred to work alone, liked to create their own schedules, and enjoyed the nature of the lesson delivery. There was one student who really struggled because he had a hard time comprehending the material. During our tutoring sessions, he mentioned to me that he would struggle with understanding new material when it was delivered online, but during the face-to-

face rotation, he understood things a lot quicker. Unlike my previous student, online tests made him overthink and second guess his answers because he felt that online tests would be particularly harder since he would have access to material. In terms of the social engagement, he told me that learning behind a screen made him shy and reluctant to ask questions or participate during class conversations.

2.3 REDEFINING THE ROLE OF THE TEACHER When the COVID-19 pandemic hit, educators were faced with a new challenge: How has the pandemic recalibrated the teachers' responsibilities in helping to facilitate student remote learning? The demands for teachers to divide their time between teaching online material, administrative duties, as well as engaging with their students, is quite high. Speaking from experience, traditional in-person methods did not translate smoothly to a remote learning environment mainly because the focus and attention were quite sparse. In the classroom, with the teacher remaining stationary at the front of the class, the conversations can often be static. "Teachers have more diverse roles in learner-centered learning environments than in teacher-centered environments" (Heo, 2004). One of the case studies I reviewed raised an interesting argument which outlined how a teacher's speech in the classroom acts in an instructional function (Sahrakhiz, 2017). In the field of outdoor school research, less instruction is given, and more time is devoted to the exploration of play. When students are active agents and therefore engaged in their own learning processes, there is a deeper understanding that goes beyond an inculcation of facts. The main issue was that the classroom for these students were now shared living rooms, bedrooms, or private offices, and not all households have an environment that supports learning. Trying to accommodate all these external factors suddenly added to the already exhaustive list for teachers. It became apparent that learning needed to be more open-minded and less structured so students would be able to find the flexibility they needed.

There have been tremendous efforts from the school board, as well as from educators to try and develop a pedagogical framework that supports students learning remotely. The societal expectations and workload for educators during this pandemic have exponentially increased. In September of 2020, educators were expected to set up their Google Classroom

and provide ample time for students to ask questions and have them become accustomed to the platform in case a switch to virtual needed to occur overnight. This meant that teachers needed to post consistently, work out any technical bugs and make sure that all students had access to technology at home, all on top of maintaining daily programming. Working through technical issues like audio and video required some basic editing skills, finding resources where all students would be able to access digital resources could be a downfall. It would take a tremendous amount of time to plan and execute an activity with the same structure. At the beginning of the transition, I provided a grace period for students to enter the class as I know many of them had connectivity or technological issues with their devices. I would also make sure to provide extra time for students to meet-up with me. I found that at first, many of my students would take advantage of the period but as time passed, even when my students were struggling, they were less motivated to ask for help. I would check-in with my students more often than normal, I know many of my students appreciated that because they were reluctant to reach out to me for support.

Research has shown that because of the additional stress due to the COVID-19 pandemic, teachers have a loss of creativity due to a lack of resources (Anderson et al., 2021). Teachers pride themselves in finding creative ways to teach dry or less engaging content hoping to spark inspiration from their students. With emotional well-being and mental health being at the forefront for both teachers and students, teachers are expected to keep morale high and resume regular programming as best they can. The level of teacher engagement directly affects the quality of a student's learning experience, and with the pandemic causing new stresses and challenges, the loss of creativity and joy that normally comes with the profession becomes displaced. With my current students registered to enter secondary school in the following year, many of them, including their parents, are concerned that they have lost a year of academics. Parents and guardians are now burdened with supporting their child's online learning, their own adjustments to changes in their employment and its enactment, limiting contact with high-risk family members, illness, and even death of family or friends (Henderson et al, 2020). All these concerns plus dealing with their child's loss of schooling, are compounded by the overall

community restrictions, further impacting the overall well-being of a parent. The shift from elementary to secondary is not only a change in structure but the academics are more rigorous and require more independence. Teachers provide students opportunities in the classroom to practice these skills and to practice autonomy. “Thus, fear of academic year loss enhances students' psychological anxiety” (Hasan and Bao. 2014). With most, if not all, of my students being independent with technology use, parent supervision at home is rarely needed. Unlike some teachers living in remote areas who have lower-income families in their classes, access to technology and home support is often an obstacle. Teaching in an affluent community, all my students have their own devices as well as stable internet to engage in online learning. All my students indicated that they struggled to transition to an online platform for learning, there was this immediate change with their attitudes towards schooling.

I noticed that more and more students were coming to me during after school hours with questions that could have been answered during class time. I found that students were reluctant to ask me questions during instructional periods because they did not want me to stop the lesson whereas in the classroom, I am able to answer questions as I facilitate. The instruction is much more face-paced online, than it is in person. Due to this, students were hesitant to interrupt my lessons. The fast-paced instruction rarely accounted for processing time as teachers are teaching near the beginning of the lesson and allow for screens to be off during independent work. Teachers stay on the call 10-15 minutes after a session has ended to answer any questions students may have. A key theme that emerged was the amount of focus and attention that online learning required students to sit through. Many of my students kept their camera off because they were self-conscious about being on screen as well as not willing to show their home environments to their peers. In my observations, I heard students say that online learning just felt optional, so they put in less effort. I have noticed my students getting distracted by other things on their screens.

Stevenson (2007) argues that larger cultural forces can still silence a teacher's efforts to embrace environmental education practices (p.274). Identifying the teacher's role in the classroom is critical as they should no longer be “a dispenser of factual knowledge” (Stevenson, 2007, p.273), but an adult that supports student curiosity. With the shift to virtual learning,

teachers who did not consider them computer-savvy might have felt discouraged as a teacher, even though they have years of experience teaching in the classroom (Churchill, 2020). Educators need the spaces to practice and the tools to accommodate all students; we can see how tech-fluency and adeptness varies widely among educators.

Thus, a new teacher development model is required to build teachers' competence in and acceptance of innovative practices (Kong & Song, 2013). The abrupt transition called for immediate changes to schooling, leaving no time for teachers to prepare virtual lessons. The overwhelming boom of online resources suddenly surfaced, and teachers were scrambling to organize classroom material. As a new teacher, integrating technology into the day plans was taught as a method to teach 21st century learners. However, fully implementing 100% of the coursework became uncharted territories for many.

Coming from a place of 'technophobia' it became imperative to examine my own beliefs and reframe what it meant to be an educator. As such, the Board of Education sent out memos for teaching training that supported those who were not as rehearsed to teach with technology and offered resources and templates to help get started with this new process. However, the time constraint to learn all the tips and tricks put a lot of pressure on teachers as they had to resume daily programming at the same time. It was important that teachers spent extra time collaborating with their division teams sharing resources, how-to's, and a communal space to talk about the changes that were happening. Bezuidenhout (2015), recognizes what the job of the distance educator demands, and what is further needed as support. This translates into restricting the staff-student ratios, improving administrative support to provide relief to educators, lowering research output expectations to what is realistically possible, and reconsidering the number of different tasks expected from distance educators simultaneously (Bezuidenhout, 2015).

2.4 REWORKING OF THE CURRICULUM. It is in everyone's best interest (teachers, students, and parents), that as we transition out of the COVID-19 pandemic, and into an uncertain future as a collective, we can truly reimagine education (Zhao and Watterston, 2021). The potential for change is monumental and reaching students in a way that allows them to be

a part of the process of reworking our education system, is key for future generations. (Gruenewald, 2003). Students have had first-hand experience of how the changes in the educational models have affected their schooling. It is important that we draw on their experiences to be included as we begin to address the transformation that will take place. With the constantly changing workforce, there is no guarantee on the knowledge or skills that are taught today will be used in future career pathways. The *Growing Success* document (Ministry of Education, 2010) outlines the performance standards on which all Ontario educators base their assessment, evaluation, and reporting. Currently, educators use an achievement chart that identifies four categories of skills and knowledge as follows (taken directly from *Growing Success: Assessment, Evaluation and Reporting in Ontario Schools*):

- Knowledge and Understanding: Subject-specific content acquired in each grade/course (knowledge), and the comprehension of its meaning and significance (understanding)
- Thinking: The use of critical and creative thinking skills and/or processes
- Communication: The conveying of meaning through various forms
- Application: The use of knowledge and skills to make connections within and between various contexts

Using these guidelines, teachers provide students with the opportunities to showcase their development in each of these skills. The fluidity of Ontario's curriculum not only allows teachers and students to take control over what is taught and concepts that are not considered important or of high priority "can be covered superficially" (Mnyusiwalla & Bardecki, 2017, p. 12), it also caters to how students can demonstrate their understanding. For instance, when the topic of "Climate Change" is solely taught as a unit in Grade 10 Science and is often disregarded as the other strands take priority. The words *climate change* is often used as examples in the curriculum to support extensive ideas, leaving teachers to think the issue should be an afterthought. During September of 2019, there were a series of international strikes and protests that demanded action to be taken with regards to addressing climate change. Many Toronto schools in the area encouraged teachers to participate in such an event. It was so powerful to see the messages being unified and the demand to urge government and political leaders to address climate change. However, not every school board has access to such

opportunities so it is important that they are still addressing it in the classroom as best as they can, by creating a platform where students are able to have real discussions about what is happening in the world. Current literature suggests that given the pressures of an overcrowded curriculum, lack of resources and time constraints, teachers are already overwhelmed by the number of expectations needed to be covered over the school year (Mnyusiwalla & Bardecki, 2017, p.132). Given the circumstances of teaching during a pandemic, teachers are burdened with more than just delivering instruction.

It is widely acknowledged that both values and skills are needed for students to function in a globalized world. What can be guaranteed is the development of humanity that allows each one of us to present our own unique set of skills. Zhao and Watterston (2021) state that developing students' capabilities and prioritizing a students' social and emotional wellbeing should be a bigger concern than focusing on 'template' content and knowledge. The flexibility of the curriculum shows promise for personalized learning for students, allowing programs that can adapt to student's unique sets of skills and needs. Enabling students to co-develop part of the curriculum is not only necessary for them to become unique but also gives them the opportunity to exercise their right to self-determination, which is inalienable to all humans (Wehmeyer & Zhao, 2020). Students have the capabilities to advocate for new learning content, especially those who have a clear understanding of their future career pathways. By engaging in conversations with the youth, they will begin to understand on a deeper level as to why they learn and what they learn. Students should be at the forefront of their own learning, and teachers should facilitate these processes by educating these students on how to make informed and conscious choices. Zhao and Watterston (2021) argue that this generation of learners are much more active and tech-savvy; during this period of transition to remote learning, we call on our youth to identify their own strengths and weakness and allow them to pave the way of their own schooling.

Using storytelling as pedagogy is an excellent starting point for preservice teachers who wish to engage youth in the way. If the teacher's sole purpose when introducing stories in the classroom is to "improve student's retention to detail" (Davis, 2014) that certainly "checks off boxes" for reporting. However, if there is the slightest intention to help students strengthen

connections, then that plays on the teacher's ability to humanize it in an entertaining fashion. There are moments where the roles of being a teacher and student dissolve, and the organic nature of human beings simply engaging in conversations. Change can come from empowering each other through collaborative action and honest conversations. It begs us to ask the question, "How can we learn to navigate such change in these new spaces?" As educators, we should allow students to capture their moments in time where certain words may have made a profound impact on their life or allow them to present uncomfortable topics, they wish more people would talk about. Like any teaching role, expertise is needed in mediating the learning experience (Kearney, 2011). Our role in their learning is to facilitate and support, asking the right questions can pave the way for this new change.

CHAPTER 3: LITERATURE REVIEW ON VIRTUAL LEARNING

This chapter discusses the ways in which distance or virtual learning, whether that be asynchronous or synchronous, can impact a students' academic and social/emotional well-being. Although there is no single definition for the term distance education, there are key components of distance education that researchers can agree on: (1) separation of instructor and learner, (2) use of media, (3) two-way communication between instructor and learning (Mood, 1995). Distance learning would describe learning that would take place in students' homes. As distance learning is becoming a more recognized teaching method, the reliance on technology has never been so extreme. The pressure of being required to provide immediate responses can be taxing. Especially in a world where we are unofficially "on-call" due to the accessibility of our mobiles, there is an overwhelming sense of urgency every time our screen flashes. By creating boundaries based on our availabilities, this allows us to create schedules that better suit our mental well-being (Standing, 2011). When our homes transition into a workplace, the struggle to remind ourselves to take time out of our day for ourselves decreases. Standing (2011), argues that a growing proportion of the world regards their home as part of their workplace (p.138); when those lines start to blur, any discussion about a 'work-life-play' balance becomes artificial. As we transition to a new way of delivering instruction, we

must exercise extreme caution and pay particular attention to the fact that we do not rely on indoor play just because of convenience.

If teachers take this time to exercise mindfulness practices and outdoor excursions, students will be able to hone in on developing strategies that work for themselves. Henriksen et al. (2020) stated that teachers need to explore and learn tools such as the Chat function in Zoom because it can add effective co-constructive parallel communication. The pressure to keep the same quality of learning that in-school instruction provided seemed to be an expectation that parents had for teachers. Instead, educators should be embracing and recognizing that even though the space and quality will be dissimilar to in-school teaching, online education cannot replace all aspects that schools play. The effectiveness of online education cannot be determined as it covers a wide variety of different practices for students of all learning needs and styles.

3.1 ASYNCHRONOUS AND SYNCHRONOUS LEARNING. Distance learning is defined as an alternative model of learning where student and teacher are not located in the same classroom at the same time (Carswell and Venkatesh, 2002). This normally involves correspondence through email, online meetings, and scheduled classes. The distinction between synchronous and asynchronous is defined by real-time interaction between the student and the teacher. Teaching synchronously during set times of the day mimics the immediate response time as if all parties were in a physical classroom. Current research investigates how the learners' perceptions of using technology affect student acceptance of the new learning environment and its impact on related outcome (Carswell and Venkatesh, 2002). The expectations in student learning outcomes are the same, even though no time was given to allow for a smooth transition to an online platform. In distance learning situations, the student and teacher are separated in space; there is no requirement of a fixed place for student and teacher to meet, which increases flexibility in scheduling educational activities (Carswell and Venkatesh, 2002). In my experience as a rotary teacher, transitions are important as classes need to move from one to another. However, with COVID-19 and respecting the protocols put in place, it became easier for the students to remain in the classroom and the teachers would

rotate. Many teachers struggle with classroom management during this time as it is unstructured. With virtual, teachers can seamlessly transition to periods with a click of a button, allowing ample time for students to self-reflect.

Asynchronous learning provides students time to self-reflect and individually process material at their own pace. In a study conducted by Amir et al. (2020), researchers discovered a strong correlation between sufficient time to prepare lessons and sufficient time to review study materials in distance learning and efficiency related to motivation. This might in fact benefit students whose first language is not English or students who have difficulty speaking or have social anxiety because “many people felt included to type their responses in the chat area rather than speaking” (Griffin, 2019, p. 373). In fact, there are many students that have opted to do distance learning this year because being able to sound coherent in front of their peers is hard when immediate responses are often required face-to-face. When students came back to school at the end of the year, I noticed that they were shaky and anxious to talk to teachers and ask for directions.

The physical space of the classroom can allow these students to thrive both academically and emotionally, as flexible seating and calming corners can accommodate their needs. It is important that teachers explore how green spaces can be a help to subdue some of the ADHD tendencies. From my experience, students with ADHD and/or anxiety have been able to better manage their schoolwork through asynchronous learning because they are now forced to advocate for themselves and prioritize their work. Now that learning is in a familiar space and the teachers and students are unable to see the physicality of what these exceptionalities bring, (fidgeting, walking around, tapping etc...) students can work around a schedule that works for them. I have heard teachers speak of students with behavioural challenges as a list of behaviours rather than as individuals with exceptionalities. This type of learning provides constant momentum for students who require a little more time to reflect and respond. Both structured and unstructured formats of classroom discussion provided opportunities for students to interact with others, at their own pace.

While students are given the option to leave their camera off, teachers are encouraged to provide opportunities such as breakout rooms where students are put in smaller groups with

their camera on to discuss material. Most of my students agreed that group discussions allowed them to bounce ideas off each other and even to extend their own thinking. Digital technologies are reshaping human activity from our daily life to international relations, from work to leisure, and redefining multiple aspects of our private and public life (*UNESCO Digital Library*, n.d.). In fact, studies have shown that blending learning (integration of classroom and distance learning to facilitate an independent, interactive, and collaborative learning among students), increases student engagement and performance (Amir et al, 2020). Especially during the times that asynchronous learning takes place, students can do more self-directed learning. In this case, teachers provide the parameters for an assignment, but the flexibility provides students with a choice. Keeping with the trend of face-to-face learning methods, it is important that teachers design distance education materials in such a way that students understand it clearly and are provided with sufficient opportunity to practice, self-evaluate, reflect, and internalize the material (Bezuidenhout, 2015).

By teaching on an online platform, teachers have taken on a role of discussion leader and facilitator. Being able to learn and utilize the different teaching tools such as the use of 'breakout rooms', this can allow opportunities where we can mimic the physical environment of having smaller group discussions. There is also the task of managing behaviour that many teachers are a challenge, such as reminding students to stay in their seats or focus on what is in front of them. As it can be quite difficult to hear multiple voices speak at once, teachers had to set noticeably clear expectations on etiquette when it came to asking questions and being patient. The learners' age presents a discrepancy in terms of how engaged they are during synchronous learning. One of my students who normally struggles with self-regulating his behaviour in the classroom, mentioned that he would get distracted by his friends in the classroom, but at home, with his camera off, he would have his TV on, his phone in hand and would be able to do multiple things at once. It was not until he submitted his work that I realized were not edited or done with the amount of effort that I expected him to do. We discussed how to stay focused by setting up short blocks of time with breaks in between. The work that he did asynchronously was exceedingly better in quality because he was able to choose when he wanted to do it and knew the due date ahead of time.

There were conversations that happened afterschool with my students and their parents, with regards to late submissions and lack of participation in class. The consensus was that the student was losing focus because learning was not as engaging as it once was. Many teachers included textbook work, PDF files of handouts because it was easily accessible; teachers could take it up by sharing the answers on their screens. With this lack of engagement, I needed to create ways where students were able to re-connect again, with their peers.

3.2 HOW DOES VIRTUAL LEARNING FOSTER OUTDOOR LEARNING? Recognizing that the very notion of online teaching and outdoor learning can be considered oxymoronic, the self-directedness of the student's involvement allows for opportunities of reflection. The notion of 'learning online' carries with it many preconceived assumptions, one of which might be perceived incompatible with traditional interpretations of experiential learning that is held so central in outdoor education philosophy (Dyment et al. 2018). Given that transitions to online delivery are a result of the pandemic, we can also argue that we have cultivated an alternative learning environment that will be here to stay. Therefore, teaching methods that incorporate interaction between material and context are explored; it becomes useful to think about learning as situational rather than experiential. The inclusion of self-directed experiential learning activities required students to go into their community or local context, observe outdoor learning, collective evidence (e.g., taking pictures, writing a journal entry etc...) and report back to the other students through online discussion boards and live streams to share their learning (Dyment et al., 2018). It makes the synchronous meeting much more enriching as students can talk about something tangible and share their experiences.

As opposed to sitting in front of the computer for an extraneous amount of time, teachers can better use those 50-minutes to encourage students to connect with our natural world. Teachers are wary because the learning done outside is not often measurable. Historically, the field of Environmental Education (EE), has lacked the ability to support and produce routine assessments and evaluations (Fleming and Easton, 2010). As educators, we are required to provide evidence of student work to report progress, yet many EE programs lack assessment plans. The challenge to incorporate assessment practices as an attempt to

integrate more EE programming into schooling has been an obstacle for environmental educators. Without concrete assessments such as tests or assignments, teachers are not able to provide tangible proof of progress. However, students can learn skills such as problem solving and critical thinking alongside their peers, these skills are observable but often hard to measure. In a world where career pathways are not guaranteed, teaching students skills that are transferable will allow them to work successfully in any context given.

The goal is to prompt students to make connections between the concepts learned and practical observations. It would be useful to examine my experience with online teaching models and the outcome of teaching asynchronously and synchronously. It was important to provide content that would allow the learner to explore familiar contexts with a fresh perspective. With respect to the government safety protocols, students could be exploring school grounds, parks, community spaces and neighboring environments for them to understand a sense of place. A particular focus for teachers would be gain an understanding of how seamlessly easy it is to weave the ways in which outdoor contexts could be applied to the spectrum of subjects in the curriculum (e.g., Mathematics, English, Physical Education, history etc...), rather than teaching outdoor education as a separate component.

Teachers and students are expected to be on their devices for hours at a time, leading to digital fatigue, a fatigue for constantly being queried to be online and blogged in which can lead to mental clarity and burn out (*Parenting for a Digital Future: Virtual Schooling, Covid-Gogy and Digital Fatigue*, n.d.). An online course for environmental education can seem counterintuitive, but teachers can offer oppourtunities for students to step away from their devices and still be engaged in learning. Studies show that outdoor and environmental educators need to take the perspective that they should assist learners to navigate their emotional responses as a way of supporting learning and teaching (Steele & Scott, 2017, p. 121). This should be included as part of our assessments in mainstream teaching because students are able to demonstrate such strong connections between their emotions and learning. The struggle that many teachers face is how we can document these moments where students are describing their thinking or telling us their stories.

Since school-based learning normally takes place in a classroom, we are seeing the outdoor schooling approach increasingly being used. This potentially could be due to the fact of the social distancing protocols in the immediate classroom, where teachers are struggling to maintain enough space between the students. Given a spatial-structural change to the outdoors, teachers are given more flexibility to teach where safety protocols are not as much of a barrier. Based on my experience, the four walls of a classroom provide a rigid structure where students are expected to maintain routine and follow everyday instructions of how to behave. Every student has their own space in the classroom, normally occupied with a desk and their belongings, but with the outdoor space, students are more inclined to be exploratory. Instructions are much more simplified and less scripted as a lot of the learning is based off the substance learners provide, they are much more open-ended.

As teachers, we are required to assess communication, critical thinking, and problem-solving skills in addition to knowledge and understanding. If we expect students to practice these skills, they must be provided with outdoor learning opportunities such as place-based education that allows them to gauge a sense of real-life application. By integrating place-based education into regular classroom practices, students are engaging in authentic learning, appreciating the outdoors, and demonstrating stewardship. This will allow students to not only understand the content at a deeper level but be provided with how to build real connections within their community. Knapp (2005) identified that one of the emerging patterns within place-based learning is finding connections with “real-world problem-solving in which students and teachers identify community issues and problems, study them, and propose workable solutions” (p. 279). By creating avenues for students to use storytelling as a medium, this allows for connections to be made outside of a book. Storytelling as pedagogy allows individuals to develop their own constructs for concepts and bring that meaning to light.

CHAPTER 4: FINDINGS FROM OBSERVATIONS

In this section, I will present my observations based on my teaching and student responses that were collected through conversations and writing experiences. For instance, many of the statements were through casual conversation with that student and by no means was a

structured and formal interview conducted. I also outline some of the pedagogy and processes that I used and reflected upon while in the moment of teaching. The main themes that I observed include the benefits of mindfulness practices and outdoor learning projects during asynchronous learning periods, a noticeable lack of effort from students due to the leniency from teachers, and the struggle to replicate the same social interaction that comes with in-person teaching. In this information-saturated world, it is becoming increasingly difficult to separate the things that we see and hear from things that we once believed. Giving these students an opportunity to write fiction, became this escape that led to some of the most inspirational stories. The importance of learning how to convey our feelings and communicate it in a way that would allow others to understand our most vulnerable moments, became the heart of my lessons. The challenge for me as a teacher was to deconstruct and personalize the curriculum as I made the move to online virtual teaching. This meant that because students had already produced a product, I needed to find the expectation that reflected their outcome. For example, when we were first introduced to virtual learning in March of 2020, everything changed. The way that students would upload, share, and document their work became foreign. With this abrupt change, I invited students to document how they were feeling about the extended March break and the shift to virtual learning.

Questions that prompted their thinking included: How might this affect how we learn as a class? Are you excited for virtual learning? Are you comfortable using technology all day? We had a class discussion prior to this exercise to share initial responses. They were given the freedom to present it through Google slides, comic strips, short story, Claymation, or any other form of their choosing. At first, it did not seem like an assignment for assessment purposes, but rather one to invite students to address feelings of concern. Yet, through some of the submissions that I received; I was able to connect most of what these students did to our media literacy unit. In the Ontario Curriculum (2006, Grades 1-8) it states: “By end of Grade 7, students will create a variety of media texts for different purposes and audiences, using appropriate forms, conventions and techniques. By sharing their individual projects with the class, they were able to reflect on and identify their strengths as media interpreters and creators, areas for improvement, and the strategies they found most helpful in understanding

media texts". It was not until students submitted their projects that I realized the different perspectives from which they told their stories, the elements they chose to use to make their story more interactive (music, sound etc...) and the different ways students chose to present it. This helped to create the rubric through which I was able to evaluate their projects. It was apparent that I needed a backwards form of thinking/planning to adhere to my students' strengths.

This framework provided opportunities for me to be present and observe as a teacher as well as a researcher. Virtual and remote learning tools both benefited and hindered student learning. The online platform enabled students to share their struggles and provided students with ample time to complete the work asynchronously. When I was observing, I needed to document the moments in real-time, without any subjectivity. This proved to be a struggle as I wanted to make sure that I was present and engaged with my students. An endeavor to achieve both goals of teaching and observing simultaneously was rendered impossible. Observing meant that I had to pay attention to reactions and hold a microscope to search for the answers. It became increasingly difficult for me to separate the two roles, as teaching instinctively always came first.

One thing that I noticed in observing and reflecting on my own teaching was that students missed out on those small interactions with their friends in between classes; now, the communications needed to be planned because they could not happen spontaneously. Recess, lunch, and transitional periods were times that students could engage in casual setting about their own personal lives. I have found that during these times, conversations would come up about the amount of stress that online learning was causing and how abrupt the change was. It was important for me to address this in as a larger group because it seemed to be a topic of conversation.

To overcome the limitations introduced by distance learning, I found that I needed to maximize asynchronous learning as a medium to facilitate conversation. As new patterns of communication are opening, it is important that educators understand how distance learning influences student outcomes. Some students thrive on immediate feedback and constant check-ins, whereas other students appreciate a delayed response time to gather their thoughts.

A blended model consisting of both forms of learning can allow for a universal design that suits all needs. The balance of creating a program where students can be learning synchronously alongside their peers, and yet be provided with a space through an asynchronous discussion board to chat, can be an excellent way for both students and teachers to build a learning community.

Active listening in the classroom can be a part of a larger pedagogical approach to active learning; restorative practices such as community circles provide a framework for building community and responding to challenging behaviour. Many post-secondary institutions that offer distance education provide this framework to accommodate for students in different time zones, who may be fully employed or prefer to schedule their own time to work. As such, elementary and secondary schools can adapt this structure as it can teach students to practice autonomy. Currently, teachers are required to teach 300 minutes a day, with preps sprinkled in the 5-day cycle period. I have found it to be beneficial when students are given time to think about their responses, process what the question is really asking, instead of gravitating towards an instant asking and responding manner.

Below are my observations of two student reflections that were written at the beginning of the year. The students had just finished a term and were switching between in school and remote learning. My students struggled a lot with transitioning from in-person to virtual. For instance, one of my students' grades dropped dramatically because she felt that online learning was too hard to focus on, and it was not setting her up for success for the next school year. She knew that I would be available if she needed help, but rarely asked for it because it did not seem like others were doing it. The board sent out many resources (videos, workshops, community resource numbers to call) for us to share with parents and students as extra support, but I found that many students were just reluctant to reach out. During this period of transition, my students have gone through some of the most incredible personal changes, ones that would not have been possible without living through a period that forced them to face adversity head on. These moments of growth would never have been communicated to me unless I provided the educative space to do so. For students of this age, to voluntarily open about their struggles and address their own vulnerabilities, allowed me to put my priorities as a

teacher in perspective. It was extremely tough for me to replicate the same social engagement online, but one of my students flourished on the online platform. In the break-out rooms, she had to space to talk to her friends as if she was with them in-person. I believed that she also struggled with some social anxiety, so in class she was very reserved and unwilling to make new friends. With the option of keeping her camera off, she was able to communicate with her peers in a more comfortable setting. The spotlight was not on her during small group activities, only I would be able to pop in and out of the break-out rooms. In this case, using break-out rooms decreased my students' anxiety.

I tutored this student in a one-on-one setting, and during those sessions, it became evident that for me to understand this learner, I had to foster both her emotional and academic needs. Her willingness to ask for clarification or questions meant that she was eager to learn but felt more comfortable to do so in a smaller setting. The chosen pedagogy allowed me to be present during these conversations at a deeper level. When there are structured teacher/student conversations regarding a certain subject, I find that students are often less hesitant to open because it can be very one-sided; the teacher asks questions, and the student responds. When we allow for conversations to happen organically, students can freely process their thoughts and be present during these moments.

CHAPTER 5: THE PEN IS MIGHTIER THAN THE KEYBOARD

This chapter delves deeper into the ways in which online learning matters to students by examining the literature relating to how students' thinking processes change when they are given the option to either handwrite or to type responses. One of the major pedagogical changes that occurred during this pandemic period was the organic shift from offline reading/writing tasks to an online on. "Changing the technologies of writing has significant implications, because different technologies are materially configured in diverse ways "(Abersek et al., 2018). This section is concerned with how on one hand, typing might be a means of equitable engagement for some and yet it has interfered with mindful thinking during the writing process for others. Now, students are not given the option to handwrite their responses. The hand itself now plays a different role for this generation of digital natives - the

fine motor skills required to hold a writing utensil is now used to scroll and tap on screens. Handwriting is more time-consuming and tiresome, that is why many students prefer to type when given the option to. However, technology acts as a great teaching tool for those already equipped with the ability to write easily. For those high achievers, they can use the thesaurus function to search for new vocabulary rather than using words that students are already familiar with.

5.1 WRITE MORE, TYPE LESS. Research has been conducted regarding handwriting versus typing notes out while listening to lectures and analyzing whether students are able to retain information based on the two methods. In my experience, I have found that conceptualizing what the speaker is saying, and synthesizing the material before translating it onto paper, made it easier for the content to sink in. But the speed in which the lecturer would speak, became overwhelming at times as I would be stuck trying to figure out what was said previously. However, the goal of this paper is to focus on writing from an elementary standpoint where most writing takes place through reading comprehension, essay or journal writing and less on copying what the teacher is saying. However, virtual learning helped many students develop their computer skills at a much faster pace than they normally would. In our society that thrives on creating innovative technology, the skills that students learn now would be applicable to their jobs in the future.

When I tell my students that we will be starting our lesson off with some creative writing, most of the students would reach into their desk and grab their technology, rather than a notebook. A handful of them retired to paper because they were not provided with their own personal devices. I kindly reminded them that the purpose of these exercises at the beginning of our lessons is not to write as much as you can, but to reflect. In my observations, I heard my students say that they had to be more patient with handwriting because they were not just blindly typing the thoughts that came to mind. They had to consider what they wanted to say, and how to say it. Some of my students mentioned that there was also the freedom to write without the risk of copyright since there was no technological tool to obtain information from. As writing is the process of externalizing the content of our thinking, what we know, what we think, what we feel (Abersek et al., 2018). When students have their technology in front of

them, they often will just start writing, and there is not much depth to it as they have the quantity over quality mentality when it comes to writing. In my observations, more students submitted pieces online rather than handwritten. I overheard some of my students mention how the use of Grammarly, a program that would easily detect grammatical errors and spelling mistakes, was an easier alternative than eating themselves. Because many students did not want to interfere with my lessons, using search engines such as Google or YouTube became easier to rely on in terms of answers.

The learners did not need to be mindful of the cognitive aspects of writing, because writing assistant tools/automated grammar checkers became wildly available for them. It provided students with a safety net that allowed them to focus less on the mechanics of writing and focus more on the big idea. In my observations, I noticed that students would write more on paper, because the speed in which they could type, matched the fluidity of their thought process. I overheard a student mention that they just needed to type as fast as they could to get their ideas out because he had too many; he hoped that the auto-correct would act as a safety net for grammatical errors. Money and Bluck (2015), conducted a study about the factors influencing student preferences when comparing handwriting and typing; they concluded that some students felt pen and paper meant you can think about the next step as you are writing, while for typing the thinking goes as far as the sentence. When approaching a statement such as this, we can gain a better sense of how students' thinking processes change based on the mode in which they are using to write. We can see that there is this lack of convenience that students meet when it comes to submission. *"I mean... I could handwrite it and then take a picture of it and upload onto the Drive, but it's annoying and takes too long."*

Many learners find the editing process (drafting, revising, proofreading etc...) to be time consuming and useless given the accessibility to digital writing assistant tools such as Grammarly. The accessibility of programs like Grammarly, that make it a one-stop shop for catching spelling and grammar with a click of a button, allows for students to skip that necessary step that forces them to engage in reflection. With writing, we take several steps to plan, draft and edit; as we are making the gradual shift to technology, there is the natural fear that students will lose that skill of their own thinking. Learning to identify the revision that is

often necessary in understanding the mechanics of writing, one misses out on such skills when students fall back on the accessibility of assistive writing tools. This suggests that teachers should exercise considerable caution in making inferences about a student's ability to write authentically. When we result to peer editing as part of the process, there is an engagement in the dialogue that allows students to build on each other's questions and comments. Increasingly, schools are encouraging students to use computers and paper-pencil tasks are becoming a more archaic way of communication as many students are lacking even the basic fine motor functions to hold a pencil. There is a hesitation to push students to write in school because the direction of education seems to be more technology based.

Writing became this cathartic act; there was something about either telling your narrative, or having someone tell you theirs, that released a sense of vulnerability. The very essence of sharing whether that was to a close peer or within a community classroom provided this human connection that was so notably powerful. With the use of writer's notebooks and digital storytelling, teachers can maximize engagement online and keep those relationships intact. By creating conversations around those observations, we can guide our next lessons based off student inquiry. Learners can supply the substance for the lessons and allow them to become agents in their own education. It was the writing and processing of the thoughts, that students knew I wanted to see. For the ones that scraped the bare minimum to get marks, I was not seeing their voices in their writing, I was seeing answers to a question. The responses sounded generated and robotic to the point where it became hard to differentiate between the responses. I wanted to see students who were passionate and convincing in subjects that traditional schooling ignored. I wanted to bring back the voices that amplified the classroom, the ones that were now hidden behind the muted screens.

CHAPTER 6: NARRATIVE AND STORYTELLING IN EDUCATION

The twenty-first century learners must not only be able to read and write, but learn to save, upload, download and share information among multitudes of online platforms. Since there has been a growing popularity with modern technology and devices, it's learning how to navigate with these digital natives who are rehearsed with these new forms of media. "Most of

the digital immigrants are teachers while digital natives are students” (Makoe, 2012). It is therefore necessary for the digital native skills to improve their practice. The aim is to ensure that technology is not perceived as an add-on but as an integral part of the curriculum (Makoe, 2012). As we move forward with the potential of remote learning as a permanent form of education, it is important that the consist use of technology is upheld. Social networking sites such as Twitter, Instagram, Tiktok, present stories in bite-sized chunks and it becomes imperative that educators are to examine their practices to keep up with a student's full participation in these environments. This section of the paper addresses the question: How can we mediate these stories and prepare our students to become media literate when the current digital tools may not even fully exist years down the line? The key is to become co-learners with our students by learning to blend our traditional forms of teaching with mixed media. As educators, we teach with a focused learning objective, and that may be to educate students on creating realistic characters and yet part of that aim may also call for creative ways to develop that character. Students can show ingenuity in finding diverse ways to express themselves and digital storytelling is one way to do this. Yet the fear of overusing flashy graphics too often trumps the value of telling stories.

6.1 IMPORTANCE OF NARRATIVE AND STORYTELLING IN THE CURRICULUM. This section of the paper explores how teachers can ease narrative inquiry with individual and collaborative learning through online activities and lessons. Understanding how to use storytelling as pedagogy through distance learning can offer prime oppourtunities for students to engage in genuine reflection. How might we include an online platform for future practitioners and students to engage constructively in conversation about learning and teaching innovations in diverse twenty-first century learning contexts? (Dyment et al., 2018)? Narrative inquiry, as a teaching method, allows learners to explore connections between the self and the world. Children are inquisitive by nature; as educators who instruct young children, we try and harness and nurture those moments that allow opportunities for teaching to take place. It is therefore incorrect to assume that students need help connecting with nature when that

relationship was always there. Our job as educators is to help students reconnect and remind them of the organic connection they once had with the outdoors.

Storytelling as pedagogy helps to create meaningful experiences within the classroom community (Davis, 2014, p. 84). Storytelling in Indigenous practices has been widely viewed as an integral part of bringing the community together (Simpson, 2014, p. 7). Stories that are gripping enough to make an impact on us. However, when these conversations are limited to what's taught in the book, it becomes hard to make those connections. Lessons that are guided by inquiry can be a challenge because instead of referring to the curriculum as a foundation, we are requiring students to ask questions. The purpose of storytelling is at least two-fold: "to understand their own lives better, even to the extent of healing their own emotional wounds and the understanding of each other through the experience of empathy (Davis, 2014, pg. 88).

Narrative inquiry, as a teaching method, allows learners to explore connections between the self and the world. Storytelling allows us to take a short vacation on the pressures of reality. By encouraging our students to engage in self-selected topics and break assignment rules, students can venture into a space that illuminates their own vulnerabilities and force a structure on the chaos of their lives. Heo (2004) argues that because experience happens narratively, educational experience should be studied narratively as well (p. 230). This idea plays well if we were to weave storytelling as part of our daily teaching methods. It should happen organically as students are continuously growing and experiencing new things, their stories are constantly being rewritten. Teachers should allow for "debates on issues that scientists have already settled" (Wynes & Nicholas, 2018, p.17) to open avenues for creative discussion. This supplies a platform for teachers to segue from a neutral approach to a student-led discussion about the issue at hand. By providing facts, students can make connections and form opinions on what is currently being said and be provided with opportunities to explore them through inquiry-based projects. There is a pedagogical approach that needs to replace the traditional teachings to allow for this type of learning to happen. The content that is delivered through mainstream media is being controlled by the richest pockets. The absent voices that are silenced by the media are the ones that demand our attention; those stories allow our youth to become a forefront for active change. Sullivan (2021) argues that stories encourage

purposeful and directed conversations because it can alleviate loneliness. By allowing our youth to engage in collaborative activities, this can be a solution to combat solitude. It is important for this generation to gain a sense of belonging as they are viscerally aware of how they are portrayed in the media.

Especially when it comes to Environmental Education, strong emphasis is put on the role of collaborative learning (Kordaki and Agelidou, 2010). There is a lack of support that teachers need, with regards to specific tools and examples of learning activities that demonstrate a collaborative learning design. Storytelling is such a powerful tool for both teaching and learning, in the classroom. The connections that students make to the stories being told allow them to make meaning out of their own experiences as well as recall previously learned knowledge. With regards to environmental education, storytelling has been proposed as a key teaching strategy for the achievement of the goals of education for a sustainable future (UNESCO, 2007).

When we tell stories to children, a reaction or response from a character allows these children to gather insight into the ways others might respond to similar problems. They can live out these moments in their imagination and process it through these characters. “Hearing and recognizing the feelings in a story is the basis of understanding emotions” (Sullivan, 2021). Younger children are not often able to express how they are feeling through words, but by understanding it through a story, they may be able to find similar emotions and learn the express what they are feeling more precisely. As teachers, we have responsibilities to instruct students on how to structure essays, write strong topic sentences and all the foundations of how to write. But learners write what they know, as teachers we do not tell them what to write, we tell them how to write. For students to fashion an authentic piece, they must be given parameters that go beyond a structured template. “Personal narrative writing is evidence of student empowerment” (Johnson, 2014). It goes beyond reading comprehension and literary analysis but rather a bigger purpose for writing. A well-put story includes the following elements: (a) Point of View – what is the perspective of the author? (b) A Dramatic Question – a question that will be answered by the end of the story, (c) Emotional Content – serious issues that speak to us in a personal and powerful way, (d) The gift of your Voice – a way to personalize the story to help the audience understand the context, (e) The Power of the

Soundtrack/music (f) Economy – simply put, using just enough content to tell the story without overloading the viewer with too much information, and (g) Pacing – dealing with how slowly/quickly the story progresses (Kordaki and Agelidou, 2010). This recipe for personal writing provides students with a keen sense of who they are as writers.

We live in a world that craves instant satisfaction, so starting a story with a captivating dialogue or scene can be quite hard for some learners to do. We all write from a place, and it became teaching learners that even the smallest ideas can grow into something meaningful and worthy. “Storytelling of lived experience represents the construction of meaning, not simply the conveyance of information (Garcie & Rossiter, 2010). That is, we choose what kind of story to construct from any experience. Our narrative interpretation represents our own process of meaning making. With the challenge of not being too elusive or magical, as many young adult fiction writers do, they learn to focus less on the events of the story and more on connecting the reader to the characters. When we ask students to author a story, we often see flashy action scenes that involve end of the world battles between good and evil. All students can come up with creative storylines along those themes but it’s the basic lessons of developing strong characters, focusing on actions and reactions and how to make the story enjoyable, come next. My students jumped at the opportunity to create a story that played off in a fictional way but writing in characters that were easily relatable. They would base a character, a problem, or a trait, from something that they have seen or experienced. It is important to feed into that and extract those life experiences and translate that onto paper.

Coulter et al. (2007), conducted a study where participants were presented with an opportunity to tell, deconstruct, and learn from their own personal stories (p. 106). The teachers were then given the opportunity to reflect, in writing, their past schooling experiences to help them understand how their students will learn. When teachers also go through these journeys with their students, there is an enhanced transactional experience that allows both parties to express what they need from each other. “Knowledge emerges from narrative when it is used strategically and connected in an ongoing dialogic between ‘telling’ and ‘doing’ (Coulter et al., 2007, p. 121). When we combine a new way of delivering content, through an

online approach, with a traditional way of sharing, students may be more inclined to take part because there is more time to reflect.

6.2 DIGITAL STORYTELLING AND WRITER NOTEBOOKS. Digital storytelling became a way for students to work through and reflect on their own journeys through a mixed media method. It required the learner to actively be engaged in their processes by telling a personal tale to their peers. The assigned called for students to answer the following questions and present it using a medium of their choosing: Reflect on the past year. How has your year changed? Where are some areas of growth that you've seen in yourself? Use storytelling to help you tell your story. One of the main skills that I set as an expectation for my students were to teach them how to "Show, not Tell." Children can very easily relay what they see and recount events, but students can also create a story with no bounds and be able to write it with a deep and underlying message that is honest and authentic. This is a skill that can be crafted overtime. Learners can very easily find their voice as they are exposed to different types of writing and experiences. By starting to understand their own, they are then able to see different perspectives and become this in destructive source of inspiration. Concentrating on a source of playing with the senses can amount to details that allow the reader to envision to story in their minds, becoming an immersive experience. Digital storytelling allows us to elevate those experiences in portals that allow us to travel through time and space, with the use of audio and visual elements.

Digital storytelling is in no means a replacement to traditional forms of storytelling; but an extension to how stories can be told in the contemporary world. Enhancing storytelling with mixed technology will directly present the story, fortify the enjoyment, and increase children's interest in creating stories (Song et al., 2020). As we shift to a paradigm of human-computer interaction, we need new ways to enhance student learning, so students are still able to get a full experience. This is yet another channel for teachers to understand their students on a deeper level. The rationale was students appear to be more engaged with what they see, thus better able to reflect on their feelings surround the story (Beck & Neil, 2021). When students create stories with their narrative as the center, it provides a rather great depth of discussion and reflection for not only themselves, but with their peers. The social aspect of these students

thrives on being surrounded by people their own age who share the same struggles. When we open those doors through storytelling, there is a shared aspect of compassion and sympathy. The traditional forms of teaching that are teacher center limit the opportunities for students to engage in such meaningful and powerful engagement with themselves. Kearney (2011) argues that digital storytelling tasks are typically open-ended, vague, and hence more challenging for students, who may be familiar with more traditional written tasks. During this process, students can learn from their mistakes, discuss, and gather feedback from peers.

These digital technologies give learners the convenience of collecting research data, storing, and sharing multimedia resources, exchanging ideas, and tracking discussions with peers during the process of knowledge construction (Kong & Song, 2013). A simple assignment could ask students to create a video diary or a 10-minute vlog about their day. The comfortability of using technology may incentivize students' engagement in projects as they are becoming equipped with digital literacy skills. My expectations for my students were to record and learn to meticulously archive their truth and weave it throughout the fiction. I wanted the students to vlog, take pictures, write, draw etc... something that documented their growth, especially during this time. For a generation that shares their lives on social media, they can be especially private when you ask them questions. It was this control that they craved, such as putting on filters, smoothing blemishes, cropping out the sadness. This is the culture they are growing up in. Creating this narrative meant that the audience could be presented with this narrative that was meticulously archived in a way that would reveal their truth. This truth would be weaved throughout fiction, allowing people to connect and relate to their stories.

Shelby-Coffey et al. (2004) defines digital storytelling as an innovative practice that allows students to further engage with the content, while encouraging the use of critical thinking and technological skills needed to navigate the ever-changing digital terrain of the twenty-first century. Storytelling combines the strong emotional part coupled with the use of sound, images, and music to narrate a piece of writing. Students use and enhance their reading and writing skills during the creation of a story that ultimately plays out as a digital movie (Shelby-Coffey et al., 2014). Through digital storytelling, students can create new dimensions for their pieces by offering up different perspectives of a familiar story. Stories now took the

form of 15 second video clips or 140-character sentences and it was learning how to adjust my instruction to allow students to explore different social justice issues through these instant satisfaction methods. The hesitation as a teacher with almost no background in media literacy was to embrace this modern technology and learn alongside my students. Storytelling focuses its efforts mainly on literary elements, summarizing, character development etc.... Students were able to enhance and practice these skills through a digital narrative of their own. I recall reading Shakespeare in high school and much like my peers, we dreaded reading and studying a work of art that we did not appreciate. Imagine if students were given the opportunity to transform a piece like Romeo and Juliet and modernize it. One might argue that technology or the student may water down the heart of such a complex piece yet, without giving the opportunities for students to try to engage in opportunities such as this one, we are depriving them of highlighting what they do best.

Hill (2020) discusses the use of digital storytelling as a way for users to craft identity and narrative to work within the limits and affordances of digital media and specific platforms, and to reflect on how diverse audiences respond to the impact of digital stories. Students are then able to speak to wider trends that make a personal impact in their narratives. Using this time to engage in a broader conversation about the types of literacy we want our students to learn in the digital world. My experiences with digital storytelling have opened my eyes to a new method of teaching, it was a project that has resonated with since completion. One of my final assignments for an online course required students to create a digital story that documented our search for various arthropods in our homes. We had to look beyond our environment that we define as a home and see it as an indoor biome/ habitat space for these creatures. The intended assignment was to visit outdoor spaces and track the different kind of species we would find. However, given the restrictions of the pandemic, our professor had to redefine what it meant to explore the outside. Rewiring our minds to pay attention to things we normally do not pay attention to, allowed me to look at things through a different lens. Bringing in projects such as this one, can open so many avenues of creativity, ways of communication and perspectives.

WRITERS NOTEBOOKS. Gemmell (2008), encouraged her high school students to use writer's notebooks because it allowed them to think about the issues being traced in the literature to engage with the texts and to make connections. Teachers widely use it as a concrete assessment tool that measures student's progress in writing. Some teachers used it as a reading response journal for students to respond to the literature, occasionally checking if they were complete. Other teachers would use it as a choice for students to write in, when given free time. Through validation of using writer's notebooks with my own class, students were going beyond responding to a simple comprehension question. They were writing without restrictions because it became a comfortable space for them to do so. It did not matter what they looked like, how they spoke, it was their own space, and they were free to be themselves.

Gemmell (2008) argues that informal writing assignments and the discussions they spurred prepared students to then answer more challenging academic questions that required students to respond to the readings, take a position and back it up with evidence. The limitations on structured and guided questions can narrow student thinking, especially questions that focus on understanding a text. Part of the process is creating a space for students to share their work with their peers. If students get into the habit of consistently writing, eventually their writing will become more thoughtful and engaging. This will allow for teachers to seamlessly weave mini lessons on writing practices as well as conventions of writing within a bigger unit. Writer's Notebooks can be of immense value because students are alone in exploring a world, free of judgement, memory filled, and it becomes a space where small epiphanies can happen. So, when they are navigating through these new spaces, they are not alone. Gemmell (2008) argues that putting students' ideas and opinions at the center of classrooms has freed student voices. It became important that they understood that teachers genuinely cared about what they had to say. With the switch over to virtual learning, I felt students would be more inclined to write in a space that was stress-free, and anxiety ridden. I encouraged them to sit outside, go for a walk and find a place to just sit and write. Whether or not I provided them with a prompt, I expected them to write it a couple times a week.

The mechanics of writing: spelling, grammar, and capitalization, became important foundations for students to understand to communicate ideas. The basic lessons of developing

strong characters, focusing on actions and reactions and how to make a story enjoyable, came next. However, teaching grammar as its own part rather than teaching it through activities, can be rather tedious and unmemorable. Getting these learners to think about body language, facial expressions, dialogue, and tone of voice are all forms of communication that allows a reader to visualize the story in their minds. It is then important that we encourage students to go outside, free of distractions and technology, and create a space in their mind for ideas to flow.

CHAPTER 7: DISCUSSION

This final chapter provides a summary of the main themes from the literature and the main themes from my observations. I make comparisons, examine how my observations relate to the literature, and unpack what this could mean for outdoor education teaching practices in online or virtual environments. The main themes in the literature include early onset burnouts due to increased screen time, outdoor projects that benefit personal growth, and the advantages of distance learning being outweighed by the benefits of the academic success and social development often found via teaching in-person.

Increased student stress levels and general anxiety became visible when due dates would approach, and students would hand in assignments with minimal effort. The effort that they put into their work was significantly lower because there was a lack of urgency to complete each assignment/project. With my class this year, I created more inclusive schedules by spacing out due dates so students could work on one assignment at a time. However, because students have rotary teachers in this division, there would inevitably be deadline overlap with multiple projects due at the same time. The literature aligned with my observations of fatigue, stress, and lack of engagement that were all impacting my students' emotional well-being. Teaching through a pandemic tested everyone's ability to adapt to the online environment and encouraged students and educators to reflect on the chaos of 2020. There has been tremendous growth and resiliency from all my students. The idea of who these youth are is constantly evolving; this means that there are always opportunities for change. This

paper examined the notion of distance learning with respect to its effect on a student's mental health and well-being.

Elementary Virtual Schooling (EVS) was instigated in September 2020 when the need for transitioning to virtual was needed after March 2020. Over the summer, interviews were being conducted, jobs were being posted and classrooms were being reassigned due to the numbers in student registration. At the time, emails were sent in July requiring parents to sign their child up for either in-person or fully virtual. Teachers who taught elementary virtual school in 2020 felt the increased pressure to build adequate connections among students since they would never meet their students in person. A Grade 3 teacher, who works with the Toronto District School Board (TDSB) mentioned that "Virtual learning does not work for every child. Some students had a harder time connecting and interacting with peers/teachers and understanding the content."

With reference to asynchronous online learning, the literature suggests that by increasing flexible scheduling of activities, students would practice autonomy. This was also widely noted in my observational notes because there was an increase in engagement when students were more focused on mindfulness practices and telling their stories rather than focusing simply on content. I encouraged students to keep a journal where for 10 minutes each day they would jot down how the day went. I told them that it was not something I would assess, but it would just be for them. There was a handful of my students who consistently wrote in their journal each week and enjoyed going back to read previous posts. I heard one of my students mention that she would only write in her journal if she was having a bad day. I encouraged her to write about the small victories and moments that made her happy. That way, when she did look back, she would remember the positives as well.

One of my colleagues mentioned that "Virtual learning forced some students (not all) to develop independent learning skills as they navigated the online learning platform with less support than they would in a classroom." Students can prioritize their tasks when deadlines and due dates are supplied much earlier. Carsell and Venkatesh (2002) argue that distance education dismisses the metaphor of the classroom by designing an educational environment without real-time interaction between student and teacher. Often, students seeking support

would result in a delay of a couple of hours or days because there is a lack of real-time interaction. I found that because of this anticipated delay, my students researched answers independently. Although independence flourished, there was no discussion about the struggles that the students had during a particular activity. The consolidation of a lesson is equally as important as understanding the content. At the end of the lesson, there is always time for students to ask questions--to bring smaller groups back into a large group discussion where we talk about what they learned. In a larger group discussion students can build on each other's thinking, as well as see different perspectives or different ways of tackling the same problem.

Distance learning is one of the more promising alternatives to in-person learning. However, it cannot replicate the same academic and social outcomes as in person. As a class we came up with different strategies to sustain communication and how we could replicate the casual setting that recess provided. One student suggested to call each other during recess time to replicate the casual conversation that they would normally have during breaks. At the time it felt like a solution, but after some time passed it felt disingenuous. We would also play online games as a class and give students a free-period where they could choose a friend to be a break-out room with; however, the organic conversations seemed to have stopped as we fully transitioned to virtual. Distance learning can provide flexible time management and space to process new material, but it lacks the structure for less formal opportunities.

After a year of remote teaching, York Region District School Board is planning to implement a hybrid model of learning for both Elementary and Secondary schools. This means that students attending face-to-face and students attending remotely will be taught simultaneously by the same educators (YRDSB, 2021). On the YRDSB website, it states that there will not be virtual schools as they are costly to run, and the Ministry has indicated that there will be no added funding supplied to run separate virtual schools. With the pressure of transitioning back to in-person schooling, there is the added pressure of teaching remote students simultaneously. The pressure for teachers to be ready with whatever decision the Ministry decides is incredibly high. There were instances last year where colleagues received their grade and class list the day before the start of class and educators were expected to teach

the next day. For the most part, parents were understanding about the how much time it would take time for students to settle into a routine of logging into class.

Understanding and creating models that allow for student choice--one that helps the student both academically and socially--is important to a student's emotional well-being. During this unprecedented time, we can recognize the 2020-2021 academic year as a transitional year to allow for examination of which educational models were the most effective. Near the end of the school year, families were sent a survey to comment on how their year went. Families shared that often priorities included: children being connected to their home school, the ability to switch more readily when needed between remote learning and in-person learning and ensured access to continuity of remote learning when necessary (YRDSB, 2021). With decisions not yet finalized, this puts families, teachers, and students in unnecessary stress about what is to come for the upcoming school year. However, establishing parameters such as bedtime, physical activity, and nutrition from the beginning can help to ease this transition. Parents will have to fill out forms, in August, to indicate their preference for face-to-face or remote learning.

There was hesitation and a sense of being overly accommodating when due dates were being pushed back more than once. Leniency was given when asked, but certain students took advantage of this opportunity by emailing me the night before to say that they did not sleep well or could not concentrate. Especially during a period when they are transitioning to high school where initiative and self-focus will be needed, it is important to remember that even though there are external factors that can affect a student's ability to do the work, they need to advocate for themselves when a problem arises. I had the pleasure of working with older students. This has taught me that open communication is needed, especially when it comes to understanding a student's well-being and how important it is to promptly address concerns when they are communicated.

With respect to outdoor projects and the curriculum, more screen-time should be balanced with more time spent outdoors. Placed-based education can increase opportunities for experiential learning, and it is important for students to maximize learning opportunities in their local settings. The pedagogy of place and how it relates to the outdoors is largely absent

from our current curriculum and students need opportunities to deepen their interaction with the natural and cultural environment. Teachers should maximize the pedagogical possibilities that nature can offer rather than relying on the accessibility of a textbook.

One of the main arguments that researchers discussed in the literature included how outdoor exploration could allow for further engagement and self-discovery. There have been times in my classroom where the need for a break was visible, bringing my students out for daily physical activity and playing games that activated all their senses allowed them to reset their minds and come back to a place where they were ready to learn. Often, I would remind my students to go for walks and try to find familiarity in new spaces. For example, a new bird's nest on the tree in their front yard or the colours of the leaves and how they change from a dark green to a light. As simple as these exercises were, they ended up leading to casual conversations about their day, and that was needed for them.

7.1 IMPLICATIONS FOR RESEARCH AND PRACTICE. Research shows that learning work is often viewed as a way of validating student's ability and failure represents the limits of their ability (Seaton, 2018, p. 42). However, when we create opportunities for learning that are completely black and white, it will restrict the type of learning outcomes that teachers will evaluate. Our social perceptions are rooted in our ability to simply compartmentalize things as either for or against. Categorization is a simple method of teaching, the tendency to sort things into neat little categories can allow us to make quicker decisions. Yet, the major problems in our world are not seen through such simple categories. Deniston-Trochta (2003) argue that our students' lived experience is the foundation for their learning (104). Learning through each other's stories helps to reify verbal constructs into something that is tangible. Learning and education become less about finality or concluding and more about recognizing the importance of progress.

Carswell and Vankatesh (2002) presented three questions at the end of their study: What new modes of instruction are possible with modern information technologies? Can the learning experience be transformed to be more effective than traditional classroom instruction? I believe that these questions are even more relevant today Provided with the time to test virtual learning to its fullest extent, future research should be conducted to

monitor these questions. With the population of online learners rapidly increasing, research should address the limitations of virtual learning spaces. Can virtual learning spaces accommodate the three key areas to promote emotional well-being: engagement, relationships, and feeling positive? If yes, then how exactly?

At the rate that information technology is advancing in the realm of education, more teachers are becoming familiar with navigating online spaces and learning how to facilitate online learning has great potential to transform the learning process. With a higher need for engagement, building relationships, and feeling positive through virtual learning, research in this area would benefit greatly the field of education and explore new methods of teaching. From a practical standpoint, asynchronous learning removes time constraints and offers students different spaces to practice autonomy. After having gone through this process of reviewing the literature and making careful observations this year, the learning objectives most reinforced in the literature reinforced were about the idea of how distance learning (specifically asynchronous learning) can be an excellent platform to integrate more outdoor learning experiences. Part of effectively utilizing these changes is to take into consideration anonymous student and parental feedback from surveys prior to the start of the school year and near the end of the year. These surveys should incorporate questions that address not only particular learning models (blended, in-person, virtual etc....) but also questions that describe the effects of the models. For example, how could teachers play a more supportive role in the classroom? How does the use of different types of technology (Laptop, iPad/Tablet) affect your child's learning? How much time do you spend each day (on average) on virtual learning (synchronous and asynchronous)? How effective has virtual learning been for you, compared to in-person? A deeper qualitative analysis is needed to reach improved learning models. It is important to examine the current debates that surround research methods in education, particular to online learning, and why certain qualitative or quantitative methods are valid and relevant to the reader. Understandably, data would be collected over a year without immediate results. Studies show that the reason behind the lack of integration of Environmental Education in the curriculum is due to inaccessible resources.

7.2 CONCLUSION. Based on the research conducted from the literature and my observations, I present a first step towards understanding some of the limitations of virtual learning in relation to the emotional well-being of students. Storytelling methods and outdoor projects delivered through virtual learning can should be considered as a way of navigating this difficult terrain for students as they develop personal narratives. A successful and effective design of online learning environments that foster this type of personal growth is still needed. Given the literature and the observations that I noted, teachers should consider how re-introducing the idea of 'learning through play', specifically in older grades, could provide better opportunities for these students to be engaged in their own learning.

My overall goal is to encourage teachers to encourage discussion on the ecological crisis such that it becomes embedded into their daily planning. This can be accomplished through online platforms where teachers present opportunities for students to utilize their own outdoor spaces like playgrounds, community gardens, and backyards. We have created a culture in which we have become desensitized by certain facts such as the cliché of climate change only affecting polar bears; largely due to overexposed images, recycled ideas, and fear of challenging the structures preceding us. As traditional teaching philosophies involve different methods, different approaches to outdoor learning are expected. A balance between traditional teaching methods and outdoor learning allows opportunities for genuine learning to take place. The Ontario Curriculum expectations are multi-disciplinary and therefore should be enacted with a multi-disciplinary perspective. By examining the current policies and publications of environmental education in the school boards, we can see the glaring gaps in enrichment and why there is not a bigger push for these regulations to be mandated. By inviting our students to center of their own narrative in online learning spaces, our role as educators should simply be to pull up a chair and listen.

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