



Principal Connections

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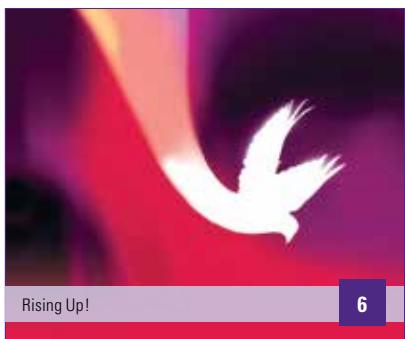
ADVOCATE

DR. JILL GOWDIE
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**ANDY HARGREAVES &
DENNIS SHIRLEY**
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 From the Editor: *To Advocate. To Believe.*



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We thank all those who contributed to this issue. Please note, however, that the opinions and views expressed are those of the individual contributors and are not necessarily those of CPCO. Similarly, the acceptance of advertising does not imply CPCO endorsement.

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Deep Engagement and Broad Well-Being

Our existential challenge

By Andy Hargreaves and Dennis Shirley





We're in a crisis like we've never seen before. Five huge beasts are breathing down our necks. They're coming for us and our children. We can't run. We can't hide. We're in the fight of our lives. It's time to face up to this Big 5, in our society, and in our schools.

#1. COVID-19 has claimed over five million deaths. It took over 1.6 billion children out of school. As the World Health Organization warned in 2018, climate change, deforestation and greater proximity of exotic species to human populations will visit more of these pandemics upon us.

#2. Climate change is creating catastrophic weather disruptions like the searing heat and out-of-control wild fires that devastated Western Canada. Economic excess has been eating up the planet. Our next generation is starting to fear it might be the last generation.

#3. Racism is on the rise. Before the recent COP 26 Summit, UK Prime Minister, Boris Johnson, warned that more and more regions of the world were becoming uninhabitable, leading to "contests for water, for food, huge movements of peoples." An old African proverb reminds us that: "as the waterhole shrinks, the animals look at each other differently." The spectre of racism is haunting us all.

#4. Economic inequality is at its highest level in 50 years. Just 26 people own more than half the world's wealth. They also avoid the corporate taxation that could otherwise rebuild a stronger public sphere, including education. This extreme inequality creates educational inequality along with severe threats to children's well-being.

#5. Democracy is in peril. All over the world, populism has been running amok. Barely more than 8 per cent of nations are now officially classified as "full democracies."

Although Canada is still one of them, it can no longer take its democracy for granted. Social studies must come back from the margins of the curriculum.

The world is off its axis. How are our schools responding? Three major directions are evident but they're all ill-suited to the nature and scale of these problems.

1. Rectifying Learning Loss

One argument is that we should deal with learning loss. After months of interrupted schooling, it's claimed, many students have fallen behind in literacy and mathematics skills. So standardized tests are needed to determine who these students are and to provide extra time and coaching to close the gaps.

Contributors to the Royal Society of Canada's report on COVID-19 and Schools, however, say this argument is flawed: based on narrow, misleading and outdated conceptions of achievement. Connecting learning loss to the testing industry will steer attention and resources away from a more engaging curriculum that's needed to take on the Big 5. Students need to get re-engaged with their learning, their lives and the world around them. EQAO tests, our research shows, have diminished student engagement, heightened children's anxiety levels, and led schools to avoid innovation in the grades that are tested. More test preparation and catch-up

on basics will increase disengagement even more. We need to build young people's knowledge and skills back better through engaging and important work, not with catch-up exercises and test-prep.

2. Increasing Digital Learning

Had the pandemic hit 20 years ago, children and schools would have been completely lost. Without digital learning platforms or Zoom, a lot of children's learning would have come to a halt. But the drawbacks of remote learning were also plain for all to see – screen-time that far exceeded the limits recommended by the Canadian Pediatric Association, loss of in-person relationships, and the sacrifice of green-time outdoors for screen-time inside.

Schools mustn't overdo their digital learning commitments now everyone is back. Homework, work folders, messages to parents, assignments, and teacher feedback - do these all need to be stored on Chromebooks? Let's not turn too quickly to technology to manage groupwork or split-grade classes. We mustn't make technology the answer to everything. Of course, in moderation, screen-time can help us fend off the Big 5. Climate change scenarios can be simulated. Information about the global fate of democracy can be accessed digitally. Children can expand their experience of diversity by networking virtually with communities elsewhere.

But moderation is being sidelined by exuberance and excess about online options. Every school should have an ethical technology strategy that manages risks like digital addiction, excess screen-time, visual-image enhancement

by adolescent girls, algorithms that reinforce biases and prejudices, and displacement of other activities like conversation and outdoor play. Students should participate in and help lead these strategies.

3. Prioritizing Well-Being

There was already an epidemic of mental health problems among young people before the pandemic. UNICEF places Canada's record on 15-year-olds' well-being in the bottom quartile of better-off nations. COVID-19 made this worse. Cut off from in-person relationships with their peers, glued to screens at home, and increasingly anxious about their futures, teenagers were the most vulnerable age-group in mental health terms. So, it makes complete sense to make well-being the priority now.


Or does it?

In *Well-Being in Schools*, we point out that there is more to well-being than safety and security, or even happiness and fun. All students should have the right to aspire to the self-actualization and self-transcendence that is at the top of Abraham Maslow's hierarchy of needs. In Indigenous cultures, for example, self-transcendence of the spirit is often not the last level to be attended to but the first.

In Canada, well-being doesn't just have emotional, cognitive and behavioural component. It also has physical, spiritual and societal dimensions. But the spread of social and emotional learning or SEL from its psychological origins in the United States is starting to narrow how we think about well-being in Canada too. It's hard to be well in a sick society. Yet, SEL ignores the societal aspects of well-being. Many communities understand that well-being needs to feed the spirit and the soul, to help students feel part of something greater themselves. But SEL focuses undue attention on emotional regulation and calmness at the expense of surprise and excitement, for example. It stresses gentle mindfulness and resilience, rather than boisterous play, assertive voice, or outrage at injustice. It says a lot about how to regulate conventional classroom behaviour, but little or nothing about the physical, emotional, spiritual and societal value of land-based learning and being in nature. We do need to prioritize well-being, but in ways that take us far beyond SEL.



Conclusion

At this existential tipping point, young people don't need more interminable tests or constant digital distraction. They need to voice their feelings about the future, and advocate for a world that is better, fairer and more sustainable. They need to think and act collectively, rather than shade in test boxes or stare at screens on their own. As Michael Fullan and his colleagues argue, young people need to find and fulfil a sense of meaning and purpose in their lives. It will be through truly engaging work, rather than through catch-up classes that deal with measured learning loss, that members of the coming adult generation will master the knowledge and skills that will make them effective agents of change, as well as inspired and hopeful ones. The 3 Rs are not nearly enough to deal with the Big 5. Nor are calmness, resilience or fun. Deep engagement and broad well-being must become our educational driving forces instead. 

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