



Inventive pedagogies and social solidarity: The work of community-based adult educators during COVID-19 in British Columbia, Canada

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Abstract

The societal lockdown imposed in Canada in March 2020 to stem the spread of COVID-19 severed key points of connection for low-income Canadians who rely upon schools, libraries and even fast-food chains for internet connectivity. This has had dire implications for timely access to vital information and resources, and has revealed the extent to which women, transgender and racialised communities are bearing the brunt of the pandemic's effects. This article describes a study that investigated the pandemic-related work of community-based adult educators in the ethnically diverse Canadian province of British Columbia. Interviews were conducted with 18 educators who were working on the “front lines” of the pandemic, to document their support of low-income and newcomer communities, to understand how these educators responded in terms of pedagogies and strategies, and to map how these pedagogies and practices might be leveraged for more equitable relationships in post-pandemic community-based education. The authors found that the educators developed a range of inventive and dynamic pedagogies oriented to social solidarity and to taking up intersectional oppressions. These “pandemic pedagogies” may contribute to more equitable and inclusive social–technology relationships in a post-pandemic future.

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Résumé

Pédagogies inventives et solidarité sociale : le travail des éducateurs communautaires d'adultes durant la pandémie de COVID-19 au Canada, en Colombie britannique – Le confinement social imposé en mars 2020 au Canada pour endiguer la propagation de la COVID-19 a rompu des liens essentiels pour des Canadiens à faibles revenus, qui ont besoin des écoles, des bibliothèques et même des chaînes de fast-food pour accéder à Internet. Il a eu des conséquences terribles pour ces personnes sur l'accès en temps voulu à des informations et ressources vitales, et révélé la mesure dans laquelle les femmes, les personnes transgenres et les communautés racisées essayaient le plus fort des effets de la pandémie. Cet article présente une étude consacrée aux activités menées en lien avec la pandémie par des éducateurs d'adultes communautaires dans la province canadienne de Colombie britannique qui se caractérise par sa diversité ethnoculturelle. Les auteures ont interrogé 18 éducateurs qui ont travaillé « en première ligne » pendant la pandémie. Elles voulaient documenter le soutien qu'ils ont apporté aux communautés à faibles revenus et aux nouveaux arrivants, et comprendre ainsi dans quelle mesure ils ont fourni des réponses pédagogiques et stratégiques. Elles entendaient par ailleurs schématiser la mesure dans laquelle on pourrait tirer parti de leurs pédagogies et pratiques pour établir des relations plus équitables dans l'éducation communautaire après la pandémie. Les auteures ont constaté que les éducateurs recouraient à tout un ensemble de pédagogies inventives et dynamiques, axées sur la solidarité sociale et tenant compte des oppressions intersectionnelles. Ces « pédagogies pandémiques » pourraient contribuer à l'avenir, après la pandémie, à instaurer des relations socio-technologiques plus équitables.

Introduction

The societal lockdown imposed in Canada in March 2020 as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic severed key points of social, linguistic and digital connection for the 36 per cent of low-income Canadians who rely upon schools, libraries and even fast-food chains for internet connectivity (CRTC 2020). The lockdown quickly revealed the extent to which lives and livelihoods are tethered to digital technologies, and to networks and “meshworks”¹ (Ingold 2011; Peth and Sakdapolrak 2020) of community support expressed through social, material and linguistic ties. In British Columbia, the most western province in Canada, stories emerged in the tumultuous early days of the lockdown of families suddenly cut off from communication. As a result, these families did not know how to contact teachers and programme coordinators, they did not realise why schools had shut down, nor understand how their children would continue to learn remotely; some were afraid to leave their homes and were

¹ Whereas *networks* refer to static, known connections among people and groupings, *meshworks* are relations that are becoming and unfolding.

running out of food. Many members of these families worked as “front-line” service workers in retail, cleaning, agricultural and homecare services, often on short-term work and residency permits so that they did not initially qualify for the new benefit packages introduced by Canada’s federal, provincial and territorial governments² (Unifor 2020). Many more did not have access to technologies to make their applications. Even those who continued to work worried about how to keep themselves and their families safe.

By early April 2020, it became clear that government institutions such as schools and health agencies – working within a monolingual English, internet-based information landscape – had difficulties responding to the digital, information and emotional needs of these diverse communities. It was into this context that community-based adult educators – including literacy and language educators, and immigrant settlement and outreach workers – stepped in. As one educator who participated in our study observed,

during the pandemic some institutions – such as government services, municipal services and universities – retreated from communities, while others – such as non-profits and community-based groups – moved forward (J., 27 May 2020).

This article explores the pedagogies of this *moving forward* in 18 in-depth conversations we held with community-based adult educators who were actively involved in creating new approaches to learning among low-income and newcomer communities during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Theoretical framing: inventive pedagogies and social solidarity

Crises are spaces of potential (Mooallem 2020) – full of fear, risk and danger, but also of inventiveness where new ways to learn, act, relate and think become possible. How individuals and communities mobilise in such moments is investigated in the field of disaster studies, where scholars research the strategies people adopt when faced with

collective stress situations [...] created by natural hazards, technological accidents, violent intergroup conflicts, shortages of vital resources, and other major hazards to life, health, property, wellbeing, and everyday routines (Lindell 2013, p. 797).

According to JC Gaillard (2019), a recurring theme over 50 years of studying disasters is that they are not natural, but rather rooted in pre-existing inequalities in access

² Canada is a federation of provincial and territorial jurisdictions, each with their own government. Provinces have powers in their own right, while territories have powers delegated by the Parliament of Canada. For more information on Canada’s provinces and territories, see <https://www.canada.ca/en/immigration-refugees-citizenship/services/new-immigrants/prepare-life-canada/provinces-territories.html> [accessed 16 December 2020].

to knowledge and resources. Nevertheless, those who experience disasters are found to demonstrate collective inventiveness and creative problem-solving; crises are places where “knowledge, resources, and skills gather as capacities” (Gaillard 2019, p. S7).

The COVID-19 pandemic clearly falls under the definition of a disaster, and we find the concept of “inventiveness” helpful in theorising the experiences that adult educators shared with us as they mobilised in the early weeks of the pandemic. In the context of educational practice, inventiveness evokes pedagogies that emerge from in-the-moment problem-solving, in ways that depart from how our participants said they usually carried out their work. This included pedagogies that generated new relationships with co-workers, learners and administrators; new technology uses; and new insights into people’s lives and learning as they built more intimate and collaborative relationships as a result of the pandemic. Although these practices were novel in the moment, they emerged from existing, albeit previously undervalued, capabilities within the adult education sector. Indeed, the pedagogical and emotional labour (Hochschild 2003 [1983]; Hardt 1999) in which community-based educators engage is vital to mobilising collective ties, but this labour is often ignored or discounted until moments of crisis, such as that of the COVID-19 pandemic, when inventiveness and social solidarity became necessary to survival (Burt et al. 2020; Olesen et al. 2017).

Cultivating social solidarity is a project of participatory and transformative pedagogies that have a long history in community-based education (Magee and Pherali 2019; Schugurensky 2000; Burt et al. 2020). These pedagogies are generated within practices of “togetherness” (Moskal and North 2017), interdependence and collective action that have been repressed under the weight of neoliberal emphases on individuality and self-sufficiency, and hierarchical service–client cultures (Acheson and Laforest 2013). However, during this pandemic we wondered if the dynamic inventions community-based educators were engaging in might contribute towards pedagogies of social solidarity in a post-pandemic future. Or whether, perhaps, this opportunity might invite pedagogies not yet imagined, creating a more equitable and inclusive future in terms of social, racial, gender and technological relations. To further explore these ideas, we formulated three research aims to guide our study:

- (1) *To document the work community-based adult educators and advocates have been doing during the COVID-19 pandemic to support the low-income and newcomer communities with whom they work.*
- (2) *To understand how these educators have responded through the invention (or resurgence) of pedagogies and strategies.*
- (3) *To map how these pedagogies and practices might be leveraged towards more equitable relationships in post-pandemic community-based education.*

Study context: pre-pandemic community-based adult education in Canada

Our study focused on the pandemic-related work of community-based adult educators in British Columbia, the most western province in Canada and one of the country’s most ethno-culturally diverse regions. British Columbia has a population

of 5.071 million, with 2,581,000 people living in the southwestern corner of the province, known as the Lower Mainland or Metro Vancouver, where most of our interviews were conducted. British Columbia is also a *settler-colonial society* that is located on unceded Indigenous land; settlers use various forms of state power to appropriate Indigenous territories without signing or respecting treaties. Settler-colonial societies are characterised (in part) by patriarchal norms, by racial hierarchies in institutions that privilege White settlers and by the goal to transcend the violence of colonialism by becoming a “new society” – albeit one that integrates newcomers into the goals and values of the settler society, while continuing to displace Indigenous peoples (Battell Lowman and Barker 2016; Vowel 2016). As Emma Battell Lowman and Adam Barker (2016) explain,

Racial and class dynamics in Canada mean that, despite ideals of multiculturalism, there are in fact huge variations in how people experience being included or excluded from social and structural systems (Battell Lowman and Barker 2016, p. 29).

The findings from our study document these *intersectional*³ variations in inclusions and exclusions, and the place of community-based education as possible sites of resistance to these norms and hierarchies.

Social inequalities

Although many politicians have framed the current pandemic as a “war against the virus”, Douglas Rushkoff notes that “viruses say less about themselves than they do about their hosts” (Rushkoff 2016, para. 8). In other words, the reproductive success of a “virus” depends upon opportunities provided or prevented by social organisation and behaviours. It is now a cliché to say that COVID-19 quickly found opportunities for reproduction within the fissures and inequalities in Canadian society (Jackson et al. 2020). In addition, public health communications about the virus were hampered by a shortage of multilingual information, expressed in clear language and available to all communities. For instance, several weeks into the pandemic, the British Columbia Centre for Disease Control (BCCDC) published information about COVID-19 on its website, translated into Chinese, Punjabi, Farsi, Spanish and French. However, Canadians also speak Arabic, Amharic, Tagalog, Vietnamese and many other languages – and they may or may not be literate in those languages, nor aware of or able to access the BCCDC website. More research into the information ecosystems of COVID-19 are needed, but, as we elaborate below, it largely fell upon community-based educators to interpret and translate COVID-19 information for local communities.

³ Intersectionality refers to the ways in which social identities and positionalities intersect to produce experience (Crenshaw 1989).

Digital inequalities

Information flow during the pandemic has also been impeded by Canada's digital divide, and many of the pedagogies we documented in our study stem from digital inequalities. Only 64 per cent of Canadians in the first (lowest) income quintile (earning less than CAD 33,000 annually) have access to the internet at home, in contrast to 94.5 per cent in the fifth (highest) quintile (earning more than CAD 132,909 annually) (CRTC 2020). The communities that the educators who participated in our study typically support generally fall into the first income quintile.

The quality and speed of internet connectivity also matters. Among those with access to a device and an internet connection, many Canadians cannot afford to pay for the minimum speed of 50 millibytes per second required to stream video-recorded information about the pandemic or to participate in online learning, including language classes (OpenMedia 2020). As Maren Elfert (2019) states, the narrow, employment-first approach to adult learning practised pre-pandemic in Canada (and globally) has neglected the digital education needs of marginalised groups. Pressure to enter the workforce as soon as possible can impede literacy and language learning, and has made many adults vulnerable to precarious employment, housing insecurity and exclusion from digital information networks in ways that compound the negative effects of pandemic measures (Walker and Smythe 2020).

Organisational hierarchies

Community outreach workers undertake perhaps the most intensive emotional labour in the adult education sector. They are themselves often members of racialised communities who possess vital cultural and linguistic skills. They work with individuals and families during the most difficult times in their lives, yet are often positioned as helpers on the lowest rungs of the hierarchy of community-based organisations. Their insights and experiences can get lost within institutional hierarchies that discount front-line education practice as a site for theory building, social critique and action (Burt et al. 2020). As Burt et al. elaborate,

because care work is highly gendered and involves emotional labour, there is potential for overwork and exploitation. It is often highly skilled and precarious, but these dimensions are seldom taken into account (*ibid.*, p. 16).

Moreover, government funders often have strict rules preventing policy advocacy among the organisations they fund, and typically “do not recognize the legitimacy of advocacy activities” (Acheson and Laforest 2013, p. 606). Non-profit organisations that rely on government contracts are thus wary of drawing attention to policies and pedagogies that are not meeting local learning needs. In usual circumstances, but especially in times of crisis, this can provoke moral distress (Walsh 2018, p. 616) among community-based educators who perceive injustices and harms affecting learners but who cannot readily act upon them.

During the pandemic, these normalised routines and prevailing hierarchical relationships gave way to collective efforts that opened up, as Linzi Manicom and Shirley Walters (2012) describe,

what might become thinkable and actionable when prevailing relations of power are made visible, when understandings shake loose from normative perspectives and generate new knowledge and possibilities of engagement” (ibid., p. 3).

Before further detailing these disruptions and possibilities, the next section describes the methodology we used in our study.

Methodology: qualitative exploratory conversations

In April 2020, the Canadian Association for the Study of Adult Education (CASAE) launched a webinar series called *Pandemic Pedagogies* to capture adult education practices during the pandemic.

Adult educators across Canada are doing extraordinary things to deal with a multitude of issues associated with COVID-19: home/social isolation, (health) literacy, trauma and stress, poverty and unemployment, racism, changing means of communication and work, just to name a few. With what we do, we are revitalizing adult learning and education as a field of pedagogies, praxis, activism, methodologies, and scholarship (CASAE 2020, para 1).

There was a sense that important and novel work was happening in the areas of adult literacy, and settlement and outreach, to which we, the three authors of this article, were also affiliated as educators and researchers. As Amea Wilbur (the second author of this article), expressed in one of our early discussions, “people really want to talk”.

Before the pandemic, the first author was conducting a study with community-based educators regarding their experiences as digital literacy educators. After the onset of the pandemic, an amendment to the study was obtained to add Amea Wilbur and Emily Hunter as research assistants, and to carry out conversations on Zoom to comply with regulations for safe research methods during the pandemic. We sent invitations to education and immigration organisations to invite participation in interviews, and we were contacted by community-based educators, many of whom had also heard about the project by word of mouth. Indeed, we were overwhelmed by the response. We carried out 24 conversations in May and June 2020 with educators across Canada; 18 of these were in British Columbia, and we report only on those conversations in this article. All but one of the 18 participants identified as women, in keeping with the gendered nature of front-line education work. Among these 18 respondents: three are adult literacy workers who teach literacy in drop-in technology programmes, workplaces and programmes for women and seniors; six are teachers in Canada’s federally funded Language Instruction for Newcomers to Canada (LINC) programme and in volunteer-run adult English as a

Second Language (ESL) programmes; six are outreach workers to newcomer families; and three are administrators and programme managers in immigration and settlement organisations. As noted above, in keeping with our institutions' physical distancing requirements for research activities during the pandemic, all the interviews were carried out by telephone or by approved video platforms such as Zoom. All but three interviews were audio-recorded in accordance with participant wishes, and then transcribed. Recognising the sensitivity of information shared with us, we have concealed identities and refer to participants by a first initial that is not related to their name.

We were inspired in these conversations by Shauna Butterwick et al. (2015), who engaged in “qualitative exploratory interviews” in which they invited Filipina (Pili-pino) rights activists to “engage as much as possible in co-analyzing and co-theorizing” (Butterwick et al. 2015, p. 85) about themes that emerged from their work. In our study, we sought to position participants as co-constructors of knowledge (ibid.), pursuing the following lines of inquiry with each educator:

- What are your current job role and work tasks?
- Who are the people you work with and what have their experiences been during the COVID-19 pandemic?
- What issues are important or concerning to you and to your community?
- What approaches have you adopted and what are you learning?
- What has been surprising for you and what do you hope will last into a post-pandemic recovery?

We carried out six interviews each, accompanied by analytic memos that signaled resonance with other interviews, as well as new ideas and understandings to pursue. An excerpt from a memo written by Emily Hunter (the third author of this article) captures the urgency of the moment:

J. is making learning packages for women. It takes her two days to create each one as she makes sure to include all the supplies and a letter “to make each of the women feel special”. They are supposed to be working four days a week, but she’s working more than full time and not sleeping well. She wasn’t sure how to respond since everything was closed but then found a way to continue: “This work is all about relationships and I could never look people again in the eyes if I abandoned them now” (Emily Hunter, field notes, 27 May 2020).

We wanted to document these stories in ways that captured the enthusiasm and spirit of resilience that participants shared with us. The pandemic has created suffering and hardship that has been unequally distributed among communities that already experienced systemic racism, transphobia, gender discrimination and oppressive labour conditions. Yet communities are *not* broken. Educators told us stories of “complex and contradictory desires” (Tuck 2009, p. 421), of ways in which people surprised themselves. We learned in our conversations of the ways in which educators have been reclaiming community-based education as the rightful place for resisting oppressions based on differences, complexities and collective action (Goodkind and Deacon, 2004). In this article, we consider that potential from

the perspectives of community-based educators – rather than from learners or community members whose stories are still to come.

As we listened to and engaged with these stories, we used prompts that invited our participants to co-theorise and co-analyse with us:

- Why do you think that is?
- What is needed to change/address/intervene in this?
- How do you envision things unfolding?
- What needs to happen now?

As our conversations progressed, a map began to form of pedagogies “in the wild”: unplanned, organic and surprising. We (the authors) met regularly to discuss our memos and the interviews, generating patterns, questions, links and differences across the collection as a whole. The ideas being generated took us into relevant literature and theory so that the analysis emerged through the iteration of theory, the interview recordings and analytic memos. In the next section, we present the findings which emerged from this analysis.

Findings

A topography of pandemic pedagogies

The first goal of our study was to document the work community-based adult educators were doing to support the low-income and newcomer communities with whom they work. To this end, we present (in Table 1) findings from our conversations as a *topography*,⁴ marking the community challenges brought on by the pandemic, the structural causes of these challenges and the pedagogical inventions developed in response by educators, in collaboration with learners, families and community members. The challenges and pedagogies we describe each represent complex political, material and social problems that merit more in-depth study; we hope this article offers entry points for such investigations.

In response to the second goal of our study (to understand how educators responded in terms of pedagogies and strategies), we drew upon participants’ co-analysis and co-theorising to more deeply understand their pedagogical responses during the pandemic.

Intersectionality: working with complexity

Intersectionality is “a way of understanding and analyzing the complexity in the world, in people, and in human experiences” (Hill Collins and Bilge 2016, p. 2). Thinking both retrospectively and prospectively, almost all of our participants noted

⁴ A topography is an orientation to surface features of a landscape.

Table 1 A topography of pandemic pedagogies

Community challenge	Structural cause	Pedagogical response
Fear about COVID-19	<p>COVID-19 advice and information were available largely via the internet and cable TV (not all homes have this), mostly using monolingual English and health jargon.</p>	<p><i>Family and community members:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● established WhatsApp networks to translate and contextualise information within family and community networks and to counter misinformation: “Families take it in turns to translate information for each other” (N., 11 May 2020). ● created and delivered multilingual colouring books for other families to teach how COVID-19 spreads ● set up GoFundMe pages to raise money for food and rent support ● undertook advocacy work with government agencies: “We are doing essential work during the pandemic and yet we cannot afford to eat” (C., 25 May 2020). ● took turns to create and deliver food boxes to families.
Food insecurity and fear of losing housing	<p>Undocumented workers in agriculture, grocery stores, cleaning and construction, for example, do not qualify for a Canada Emergency Response Benefit (CERB) if they lose their job due to lockdown. They are considered essential service workers but are also so underpaid that they have had difficulty meeting their basic needs.</p>	<p><i>Educators and outreach workers:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● made intensive efforts to bring classes online using Zoom, Microsoft Teams and other platforms ● used new modes of collaboration to teach one another how to use these new technologies ● conducted telephone and video tutorials with learners to teach them how to use Zoom and other technologies ● hosted online cooking and art classes ● organised no-contact book exchanges in parks ● prepared learning packages for children and adults.
How to sustain learning communities	<p>People soon wanted to resume learning, but needed to do so remotely.</p>	<p><i>Educators and outreach workers:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● made intensive efforts to bring classes online using Zoom, Microsoft Teams and other platforms ● used new modes of collaboration to teach one another how to use these new technologies ● conducted telephone and video tutorials with learners to teach them how to use Zoom and other technologies ● hosted online cooking and art classes ● organised no-contact book exchanges in parks ● prepared learning packages for children and adults.

Table 1 (continued)

Community challenge	Structural cause	Pedagogical response
Mental health and traumatic effects of physical distancing	<p>The "safety" of physical distancing is not always safe for everyone. For example, many learners became unsafe as they struggled with the mental health effects, and other dangers of deep loneliness and isolation.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● dropped off customised learning packages (with personal letters, materials and activities to inspire and encourage) on families' doorsteps or in parking lots (to allow appropriate physical distancing) ● checked in with families via telephone calls: "How are you doing?" (This was a new approach, one of the most low-technology, yet highly effective strategies participants reported to us.)
Access to emergency benefits	<p>Information on federal government benefit packages was mostly online, with the phone-in option frequently over-run due to high demand. However, once people had help getting online, the process was well-designed and accessible, suggesting that governments <i>can</i> create intuitive and accessible online platforms.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● <i>Educators and outreach workers</i> conducted telephone tutorials to walk people through the benefit application process ● contacted government agencies to advocate for people whose residency permits were about to expire ● created case histories using WhatsApp so outreach workers could collaboratively develop strategies to deal with residency and benefit eligibility with different government departments ● created and shared summaries of available government benefits in different languages.

Table 1 (continued)

Community challenge	Structural cause	Pedagogical response
Gender-based violence and vulnerability of women in isolation and Anti-Asian and anti-Black racism affecting community members	<p>Lockdown can exacerbate violence and abuse. For example, abusers who lose their jobs and turn to alcohol tend to become more aggressive, control access to the telephone and technologies, and control their partner's activities.</p> <p>Racist attacks increased in Metro Vancouver as disinformation about the coronavirus circulated in social media.</p> <p>Awareness of systemic anti-Black and anti-Indigenous racism increased due to high-profile police killings of Black citizens in the United States and Black and Indigenous people in Canada.</p>	<p><i>Educators and outreach workers</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● conducted discreet check-ins with women learners; ● made regular telephone calls ● established partnerships with Battered Women's Support Services ● held Zoom drop-ins for LGBTQ2S+ community* members ● ran online art classes for women, who could invite family members from their home countries to sew together ● helped raise awareness of gender violence shaping women's lives and requiring new programming and practices ● helped raise awareness of the need to engage in anti-racist education, and education about systemic racism within community organisations and among learners.

*LGBTQ2S+ community refers to Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer and Two-Spirit as well as those who identify as intersex, asexual, pansexual, questioning, non-binary, and other gender and sexuality identities (University of Toronto 2020a, para. 1). *Two-spirit* refers to "a person who identifies as having both a masculine and a feminine spirit, and [this designation] is used by some Indigenous people to describe their sexual, gender and/or spiritual identity" (University of Toronto, 2020b, para. 1). The term should not be used by non-Indigenous people.

that intersecting and compounding effects of oppression based on gender, race, class, age, immigration status, language and so on were made palpably visible during the pandemic. For example, participants spoke about the racism that learners were experiencing in the community during the lockdown in March and into the summer, due to existing racism made worse by disinformation about the pandemic. One learner's husband was verbally assaulted in the grocery store, and another learner was shouted at in the street. This created a climate of fear, but also a space for adult education programmes to address racism and anti-racist education more directly than they had previously. As N. observed, "The sector doesn't allow you to be strong and bold about such things as we need to be" (N., 11 May 2020). It was within the spaces of intersectional differences and oppressions that the educators were pressed to engage in pedagogies that stretched them both emotionally and intellectually.

Not knowing how to work was a huge stress for me – how can I do this? Being able to do something is better for me than staying away (J., 27 May 2020).

Disrupting hierarchies

Many participants reflected that the immediate need to check in with learners and families (about their safety, well-being and access to benefits and online learning) collapsed traditional hierarchies between client and service provider, teacher and learner. They quickly moved into modes of collaborative problem solving and direct interpersonal communication to meet emotional and material needs in the moment: including making telephone calls, creating personal learning packages to deliver to homes, organising online cooking and art classes, and offering digital literacy support over the telephone or in a park or parking lot (which allowed appropriate physical distancing). Importantly, learners took on this work of checking in too, as well as proposing topics for impromptu Zoom meetings, helping fellow learners to use the new technologies, and sharing cell (mobile) phones and information about food and resources.

Many educators said that these practices disrupted the usual approach where supervisors or administrators would design programmes, and then settlement and outreach workers would carry them out, with learners typically having little say. Working *alongside* instead of *for* community members opened up new possibilities for better, more responsive programmes. Respondents also emphasised that resilience was built through collective action rather than the usual focus on fostering autonomy and self-sufficiency. According to N., this entailed:

moving from idealising independence toward interdependence and collaboration. This is a fine balance between supporting people to be confident in their actions, to have choices about the services and resources they draw upon, while also learning to reach out for support and to support others (N., 11 May 2020).

Educator C. works within a *popular education* approach⁵ with essential service workers and their families, who were struggling to qualify for paid sick leave and safe working conditions during the pandemic. They engaged in collective action in a spirit of solidarity and also to improve their political education: “These are our rights; we need to protect our rights” (C., 25 May 2020). C. stated that pedagogies oriented to political education are often discouraged among refugee and settlement organisations because they must separate service delivery from advocacy and critical pedagogy. Reflecting upon their organisation’s accomplishments two months after the initial lockdown, and just before British Columbia moved to Phase 2 to begin to restart the economy, C. noted:

Our successes were hard, invisible work. No one went hungry, no one was evicted. The hope is that capturing these experiences makes them visible and actionable for policy and programmes. Digital literacy and access are vital. Rights for workers are vital. We can’t continue as we are (C., 25 May 2020).

That things “can’t continue” as they were pre-pandemic was a recurrent theme in the conversations in our study, particularly in relation to mental health and educational access among low-income, racialised and newcomer women. As A. observed, pre-pandemic, adult education had “become more expensive; barriers to access are high, programmes have been cut and located far from people’s homes”. A. explained that

The most common barriers for women to participate in online learning are computer literacy and access, long wait[ing] lists due to fewer classes, lack of adequate devices for online learning, lack of adequate physical space to learn, and lack of quiet space to focus since their family is around and the kids may need attention (A., 15 May 2020).

In addition, B. noted:

I have some clients; they are new immigrants and the level of isolation is horrible. I have one client and she has two children and she is at home and she doesn’t have help. She doesn’t know anyone here basically and I was trying to provide support (B., 18 May 2020).

Addressing digital inequality

A. observed that often it is women and not men who are unable to attend newly offered online LINC classes, “due to family commitments, childcare responsibilities, and a lack of priority for their educational needs within the family” (15 May 2020). The LINC educators in our study reported that they had lost about 20 per cent of their students due to digital connectivity issues. These were beginning English

⁵ *Popular education* is a philosophy of empowerment and a set of pedagogical approaches oriented to social justice, and often associated with the work of Brazilian educator Paulo Freire. Popular education involves “critical adult education, community organizing, feminist pedagogy, transformative education and other participatory education approaches” (Manicom and Walters 2012, pp. 2–3).

language learners who could not afford home internet or devices, and who did not have sufficient language or literacy skills to make the shift to Zoom and other forms of online learning: “Families just can’t manage it” (E., 7 June 2020). This makes the low-technology creation and delivery of personalised learning packages and telephone calls all the more significant, but it also raises concerns about equity of access to education as online learning continues during the pandemic.

For women with internet access, outreach workers looked for ways to create modes of social connection to lift spirits. O., a LINC educator and artist, missed her students and was concerned for them, so she launched a weekly online art class for Spanish-speaking women. She also invited the women’s family members living in their home countries to participate. One of these participants later wrote to her,

Thank you for giving me two hours to relax and forget the problems I have, forget the news and that I don’t have work ... I never thought I could do this (O., 15 May 2020).

K. created online cooking classes that used ingredients in food boxes distributed to families. Some 4.4 million Canadians already relied upon “food banks”⁶ before the pandemic (Power et al. 2020), and use has risen sharply during the pandemic. Food security in Canada is subject to stigmatising, since charity models often require people to register, demonstrate need and line up for food in public places. The online cooking classes K. conducted normalised the use of food boxes and created community around food as a basic right. These activities also address mental health and isolation through learning, leveraging the vital role that settlement, outreach and literacy educators play as often the only contact learners have with the outside world during the pandemic, building upon “social gathering as a low-barrier mechanism to respond to the needs of the community” (Lacroix et al. 2015, p. 63).

Addressing gender-based violence

Gender-based violence and patriarchal control are prevalent in the stories we gathered. Many of our participants addressed gender-based violence outright. Others spoke of “control issues” they had noticed among male family members, but they did not consider this to be a form of gender-based violence or abuse. Some participants acknowledged that they had not really attended to gender-based violence in their work before the pandemic but were now more aware of it.

M. spoke of an online ESL class where the husband of one of the female students kept intervening in the class even though he was not enrolled. He was trying to tell the instructor how to teach the class and attempting to control the lesson. The learners asked him to leave the online class, however this could also have endangered his wife. In this context, some educators created relationships with local gender violence

⁶ A *food bank* is a charity-run distribution centre which supplies people in need with basic food provisions and non-perishable items free of charge.

prevention organisations and learned to ensure women's safety in clandestine ways, such as setting up code words and creating pretences for in-person check-ins.

J., who works in adult literacy programmes, observed that the concept of safety – repeated in British Columbia's Provincial Medical Health Officer Bonny Henry's mantra, "be safe, be calm, be kind" (Marsh 2020) – is reassuring to many, but also exerts a class-based orientation to safety equated with the privilege of staying home. For many of the women L. supports with home-delivered learning packages and check-ins, their homes are *not* safe, and the effects of social isolation have been devastating for their mental health and well-being. N. also expressed frustration with this class-based view of safety:

In my house, even my transition of working from home with two teenagers was a mess. It is really hard to work out these relationships so imagine without secure housing. There are many of those who have no choice about social distancing. I am tired of seeing on social media how people are enjoying their time gardening and making bread. This is pure privilege; they are not even thinking of those who have no choices. It gives a false sense that the pandemic is a positive thing when for most people it is pure risk, pure fear, more precarity and then they are also shut down and don't feel their experiences can be heard (N., 11 May 2020).

A. noted that even well-meaning efforts to provide families with technologies can reinforce and intensify patriarchal norms and gender-based violence.

There have been efforts to donate cell phones to families who don't have them so they can restore social contact and information and this has been very important. But who in the family ends up with the cell phone? It is usually the husband/father. This creates challenges for us as outreach workers because we cannot check on the well-being of women in families where there is tension or violence, and of course if women call us, their husband can see this on the call history. So, technology can help many families but it only reinforces existing patterns of gender violence in others (A., 15 May 2020).

Three participants working with LGBTQ2S+ communities noted that transgender people are placed at much more risk during the pandemic because it is more difficult for them to access safer spaces and appropriate services. Those who were also homeless were particularly exposed because their usual safe spaces were closed or access-restricted, and they did not feel safe appearing on the street due to the harassment that many transgender people experience. U., who runs a programme for refugees and newcomers who identify as LGBTQ2S+, observed:

The LGBTQ2S+ community we work with was already disproportionately affected before the pandemic, and this has definitely been exacerbated [among those] who are immigrants or refugees. They are finding it difficult to find support where they feel like they belong. They may not feel comfortable talking about their LGBTQ2S+ identity within ethno-cultural groups, and people who are trans[gender] and visibly trans who can't hide their

identity are particularly excluded because there is a lot of racism with the LGBTQ2S+ community. And so they're feeling as if they can't go to different supports (U., 21 May 2020).

An unexpected and positive outcome of services moving online, however, was that they became more accessible to some within LGBTQ2S+ communities.

We have now been able to include more clients who are trans-identified. We have classes in the evening and some people who are trans don't feel comfortable to move through spaces in transit at night-time due to higher rates of violence towards them. And so being able to move all of our services online or through phone has its difficulties but has also been more inclusive (U., 21 May 2020).

These stories resonate with broader public discourse about the ways in which many women's and transgender people's lives have become more unsafe during the pandemic. In an article by Mashal Butt, Angela MacDougall of the Metro Vancouver Battered Women's Support Services observes that the isolation and stress of the pandemic are key risk factors for gender-based physical violence and abuse:

We really wanted leaders to make a statement about victims, for those that are living with abusive partners [that] your physical safety is more important than the fear of transmission of the virus (Butt 2020, para. 6).

Nikisha Khare et al. similarly observe that domestic violence in Canada was "already a pandemic" before COVID-19. Further, during the coronavirus pandemic,

Vancouver's Battered Women's Support Services has seen a 300% increase in calls. In Canada, 1 in 10 women are concerned about violence and do not feel safe at home during COVID-19 (Khare et al. 2020, p. E1218).

Conclusion: shifting power and pedagogies of solidarity

To conclude, we turn to the third goal of our study, which was to consider how the pedagogies and practices that educators shared with us might be leveraged towards more equitable relationships for community-based education in a post-pandemic future. The insights participants shared were political, personal and speculative. They offered commentary on social structures, hierarchies, leadership approaches and systemic racism – injustices which are often taboo topics within their organisations. Reflecting at this point in the study, we wonder: Who will be the actors stepping into the pandemic recovery phase? Will new spaces be created for the practices and insights of these educators who *moved forward* into the pandemic? Or will they be prevented by the frailties and austerity of a "new normal"?

Resisting dependency

In future, how might educators negotiate the fine balance between supporting communities to cultivate skills and capacities, while resisting relationships of dependence and service–client hierarchies? How might communities and individuals continue to meaningfully participate in programme design as they did during the pandemic? As U. asserted,

we can no longer just throw services into the universe and expect people to be happy with the services that you are providing them, without even asking them (U., 21 May 2020).

During the pandemic, the shift to online services suddenly made programmes more accessible to those for whom face-to-face attendance had been impossible or unsafe. It has also increased choice for community members about which services, supports and learning opportunities they seek out:

people can now go to the places they feel comfortable with instead of being directed to attend a particular organisation (L., 28 May 2020).

There is an opportunity for a resurgence in transformative pedagogies through which those often designated as “learners” can be included as community members with voice and agency. However, persistent digital inequalities have left many adults with no access to language and literacy classes, confirmed by 20 per cent of students in community-based programmes who did not return to online learning because they could not afford or work with the technology. Even within the community education sector, different and unequal learning trajectories seem to be emerging.

Valuing front-line education work and workers

The stories we collected in our study suggest that organisational policies and cultures matter. Participants told us that when an organisation’s management and board members explicitly recognised the pandemic-related work that outreach educators were doing as valued, emotional labour, the effect was exhilarating. A few of our participants said that they were consulted in decision-making, given pay rises, more vacation time and wellness days to be with their families, things rarely possible in pre-pandemic times. However, this has not been the experience in all organisations. Some participants feared that the “old ways” would soon return. Many of the pedagogies and strategies educators drew upon came from their experiences within solidarity movements in Guatemala, El Salvador, Brazil, Columbia and Eritrea, among others. How might those who identify as White settlers – often occupying spaces in the upper administration of universities, governments and settlement services – recognise these experiences of resilience, resistance and “nonhierarchical collective work” as integral to a reimagined adult education system in Canada, one dedicated to “envisioning otherwise” (Kawehipuaakahaopulani Hobart and Kneese 2020, p. 1)?

Reimagining literacies and language learning

The pandemic required community-based adult educators to use sets of skills different from those traditionally valued in literacy and language programmes: for example, collaboration and mutuality over individual progress; multilingual and plurilingual competencies rather than a culture of monolingualism; and a shift from print literacy towards inclusive uses of digital technologies and digital literacies. How might we foster more inclusive, imaginative and generative literacies moving forward?

Crises teach us that we can rise to occasions and surprise ourselves; these stories we have shared of the pandemic unfolding in British Columbia also teach us that “we can’t continue as we are” (C., 25 May 2020). The inventive pedagogies that gave shape to the stories that educators shared with us indeed “shook things loose”. But, as we write,⁷ the pandemic continues, gains in intensity, wears people down. How long can inventiveness persist when a crisis seems to go on and on, changing its shape as it changes us? What will the new relationships and possibilities that seemed so exciting, if terrifying, early in the pandemic, settle into? Perhaps inventiveness will be undone, tamed, de-funded, co-opted. In this article, we have only touched the surface of these and other questions. We still know little about the modes of survival and resistance of front-line service workers, undocumented workers and those made homeless or jobless. Nor do we fully understand what adult education might become in the wake of social isolation, digital exclusion and endless videoconferencing. However, we have glimpsed how adult education could contribute to a more equitable future, and for that we are immensely grateful to the educators who participated in our study.

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⁷ This article was concluded in January 2021.

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