The Transformation of Partners in Education

From a Distributed Learning to a Blended Learning School:

Challenges and Theories

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Introduction: Partners in Education and Distributed Learning in B.C.

Educators are a diverse group of professionals. Our motivation for joining the teaching profession often includes a love for kids, a desire to make a difference in the world, excellence in a certain subject area, and a desire to pass on knowledge that will contribute to the next generation's inventions and innovations. Rarely does an educator enter the field hoping to focus on change theory, or the practice of leadership in critical circumstances. However, in a doctoral program in education, during a global pandemic, when educators around the world are rethinking the theory and practice of education systems, it is both meaningful and relevant to deeply consider the way our education systems work, both theoretically and practically, with an eye to making some creative changes while the appetite for change is strong.

In the even more specific context of a course on global issues in educational reform, and international perspectives on leadership and teacher leaders, there is almost no better time to approach new ways to teach and learn. The incredible reach of the Covid-19 pandemic – which has affected economic, health, social, class, and education systems – means that companies and businesses are affected by the ability to generate profits and employ workers; parents are affected by the need to stay home and look after their children; social systems of connection and belonging have been affected by the need to lock down and stay home and isolated; and of course much of this is integrally connected with the fact that the system of bricks-and-mortar schools has ground to a halt. Without children in school buildings for set hours each day, the

stress for adults of dealing with the reality of a serious and contagious illness has been exacerbated, while the need to keep children learning and engaged is now top of mind for parents, educators, and policy makers around the world. As much as possible, the economic and social engines of society have migrated online: business, banking, shopping, meetings - and school - have all taken place in virtual settings to at least some extent over the past few months. But this massive sea change has provided a forum and a need for an examination of the traditional way that school is 'done', and to allow – perhaps – for a greater willingness to take risks and try new ideas.

My own education setting has been affected by the pandemic in a relatively light way. I am a Learning Support Coordinator in a Distributed Learning school in British Columbia, Canada, called Partners in Education (or PIE). In British Columbia, the Ministry of Education refers to online or Distributed Learning school settings in the following way:

> In this style of learning, students can connect with their teacher from anywhere in the world on their own schedule and their own terms. This approach is called distributed learning (DL).
>
> Teachers use a wide variety of electronic tools to teach their students including voice and video conferencing over the Internet, email, telephone calls and others.
>
> Every distributed learning school provides a teacher who works with each student to:
>
> - Plan and deliver a course of study
> - Get course textbooks and resources
> - Assess student progress and complete a report card.

> Students can choose to complete an entire program via distributed learning or partner it with other learning options like in-person classes, blended classrooms or homeschooling. (Min. of Ed., 2020)

In essence, these schools provide the option of a variety of blended learning opportunities and choices, both for families and for students. Every school district in B.C. has the option of starting a distributed learning school and developing the school's model in varied and personalized ways, depending on the needs of the students or the district, or the philosophy of the district leaders at the time. As long as Ministry of Education guidelines are followed in terms of funding rules and regulations, especially as regards students with disabilities, there is a great deal of flexibility and variability in how DL schools are run.

PIE provides a blend of remote and in-person learning for its students in Grades K to 12. PIE is situated in the Powell River School District (SD47) on the Sunshine Coast of British Columbia, reachable via ferry from Vancouver, or Vancouver Island, or via a short plane trip from either the mainland or 'the Island'. In this specific DL model, each teacher has a 'classroom' of students, who are full-time students in the case of the elementary grades (K-7), and either full-time or cross-enrolled with bricks-and-mortar schools in the case of the middle grades (8-9) or high school grades (10-12). The teachers work closely with each student in their classes. They connect with them personally – and usually in person - at least three times each year for report visits; they write highly personalized report cards based on B.C. grade-level curriculum three times each year; and they meet with students for in-class days and field trips, which are optional but well-attended. Teachers also support the Individual Education Plans (IEPs) for students with disabilities, and include in their reporting any enrichment or remedial work students have been doing. Teachers in this DL school generally give students the level of

support they need on an individual basis: not much at all for well-supported and highly-motivated students, and sometimes a great deal for students with various struggles and challenges, and perhaps deficits in the level of support they have in the home.

PIE has three campuses, with around 650 FTE students enrolled, K-12. Of those, at the end of the current school year, there were 138 with special needs/learning support designations. There were three learning support teachers (LSTs) at the two main campuses this past year, and two new LSTs have been hired for the coming year. One important note is in regard to the locations of PIE's campuses: one is in its 'home district' of Powell River; one is in an adjoining district on Vancouver Island, which is a ferry ride away from Powell River, and in a community and district which has its own DL school as well; and the newest campus is a self-contained and smaller community of students and families on a small island off of North Vancouver. Because of PIE's unique school culture, it is the DL school of choice for many students in the adjoining school district, though their own DL school is much larger, very innovative, and itself has many distance campuses around the province. In addition to the learning that takes place at home for students, with access to online or paper-based courses, and to regular communication with teachers, PIE has access to a rented bricks-and-mortar facility for two days per week for most weeks of the school year, for in-person meetings with multi-age groups of students and teachers (though attendance is optional for students, not required).

In an interesting twist of pandemic-era timing, the Ministry of Education in B.C. is in the process of moving towards a change of policy in DL education: because of the funding structure of school districts in B.C., students living in any district in the province are free to register with a DL school in any other district, or their own. From Grades K-9, this means that the full funding for each student is deployed for their education in the district in which their enrolling school is

situated. So, a student may live in one community, but find that the model of delivery of a DL school in a neighbouring district (or one hundreds of kilometres away) is a better fit for learning for them, and so the home district, which would be expecting to 'count' that student for funding, is not able to while they are enrolled with another district. In Grades 10-12, the funding is distributed on a per-course basis, so students can be cross-enrolled in any district for different courses. This often takes the form of allowing students to take some courses at the high school in their catchment district, and some courses online through a DL school, or even more than one. A hypothetical student's FTE (full time enrollment) funding could therefore be scattered around the province. This is a beautiful opportunity for students and their families to choose what works best for them, but does create problems for district leaders who have to decide how many students to plan for in a given year, and how many teachers to hire. The funding issue is real, but needs to be considered in the light of best learning outcomes for students, and this moment in educational history may be what allows for some real compromise and change in the systems of thought about blended or hybrid or virtual learning in B.C.

During the past few months of the Covid-19 pandemic, Distributed Learning (DL) schools have been uniquely placed to largely continue with school as usual, with some changes and adjustments for health and safety concerns, and the efficacy of DL may have convinced the Ministry to postpone the proposed changes for a while – though I would be surprised. Even if the DL structure remains in place past this coming school year, it is still very much worth looking at the possibilities for change that the pandemic has provided within PIE. The realization within the wider education community, and certainly in public perception and among policy makers as well, that "school as usual" will likely not happen for at least a year, and maybe longer, has opened possibilities of discussion about school systems and frameworks that have been taken for

granted for a long time. But if indeed the Ministry of Education goes ahead with a shift in policy away from the freedom and flexibility for students to enroll with any DL school in B.C., perhaps the time has come for a greater reliance on blended learning schools, which provide a hybrid choice for students and families who know that a traditional bricks-and-mortar classroom model does not work for them. Using PIE as a model of a DL school that operates with aspects of blended learning, and referring at times to details of PIE's culture, I will provide an overview of blended learning in light of the possibility of expanding provincial- and district-level consideration of blended learning schools in B.C. as alternatives to DL schools if most DL schools are mandated to close in the coming year or two. As Margaret Wheatley has said, "[W]e have only just begun the process of discovering and inventing the new organizational forms that will inhabit the twenty-first century…we need the courage to let go of the old world, to relinquish most of what we have cherished, to abandon our interpretations about what does and doesn't work. We must learn to see the world anew" (2006, p. 7).

The rest of this paper is divided into two main sections. In the first section, I will approach the literature around blended learning through the lens of educating students and meeting their needs in a personalized, self-determined, flexible, and inclusive way, as a way of moving forward in B.C., both during and after the pandemic. In the second section, I will take a briefer look at the challenges of educational change and leadership brought about by our global social crisis, which must take into account critical reflection, collaborative and collective leadership, and the utilization of communities of practice, in order to move smoothly and confidently into new ways of conceiving of the daily practice of school. This is not simple, but the foundation of progressive education in B.C. has already provided experience and direction over the past months, and that openness to educational learning and growth among B.C.

educators gives hope as we move forward, and forms the basis of the forthcoming discussion and exploration.

I. What is Important About Blended Learning – for B.C. and for PIE?

A Definition of Blended Learning

Most literature on blended, online, distance or virtual education begins with an acknowledgement that there are many terms that can be used, sometimes interchangeably, to provide a working definition of the characteristics of schools which operate outside of a bricks-and-mortar-only environment (Clark & Barbour, 2015; Horn & Staker, 2015; Tucker, Wycoff, & Green, 2017; Barbour, 2017). Clark and Barbour (2015) refer to blended learning as "part online and part traditional face-to-face instruction" (p. 5), as opposed to distributed learning, which does not need to include any element of face-to-face instruction to 'count' as DL. Horn and Staker (2015) mention that blended learning has its roots in online learning, but due to the consistent patterns of disruptive innovation in education over the past few years, traditional instruction has expanded in many cases to include some element of virtual or online learning as well as in-class time. Now, Horn and Staker use this expanded definition: "[B]lended learning is any formal education program in which a student learns at least in part through online learning, with some element of student control over time, place, path and/or pace" (2015, p. 34). Their definition also includes the aspects of at least some learning time in a bricks-and-mortar classroom away from home, and the stipulation that "the modalities along each student's learning path within a course of subject are connected to provide an integrated learning experience" (p. 35). If students are studying a unit on George Orwell's *1984* in a blended learning setting, then, "the online and face-to-face components work together to deliver an integrated course" (p. 35).

There is of course much more to a discussion of blended learning than the amount of online or face-to-face learning time it involves, or which logistics of buildings and funding models need to be considered – though those are important considerations in looking at systemic changes in modes of delivery of education. What needs to be foregrounded is the *why* of blended learning: why does a non-binary model of education (neither only in a classroom, nor only at home or online) need to be considered as a strong option for progressive, hybridized, and innovative education moving forward around the world? I posit that it is because blended learning provides a way to flexibly react to local or global crises that affect school systems (such as Covid-19), as well as allowing for inclusive personalized and competency-based education, while meeting overarching curriculum goals. This is the greater function of blended learning: providing a solid educational option for the long term, rather than merely a panicked response to a crisis through transferring teacher-centred learning online, or an attempt to pacify parents who are unhappy with the school system as it is, or students who are disengaged, frustrated, or struggling with a learning challenge or disability. As Christensen, Horn & Johnson (2017) say, schools have been slow to innovate because they have approached new models or methodologies like awkward educational tools which they are constrained to use; "[t]hey have 'crammed' the new technologies into their existing structure, rather than allowing the disruptive technology to take root in a new model and allow that to grow and change how they operate" (p. 12).

In the same vein, Sarason (1996) wrote a deeply influential book on school culture, and the difficulty of change within that culture. He addressed the issue of fixed notions of place as an example of the challenge of change: "It is understandable that when we think of a school or a school system the image of buildings comes to mind, buildings that have a distinctive internal physical structure and populated by distinctive groups having distinctively different

functions…But…those images…tend to have the unfortunate practical consequence of overlooking the myriad important ways that those bounded buildings are integrally a part of a larger picture" (p. 2). That image of school needs to change, and to reflect the bottom line of education: "[c]reating and sustaining contexts of productive learning for students" (Sarason, 1996, p. 387). Sarason goes on to say, "Schools are not the factories they once were, but the conceptions, culture, and organizational features of schools today (the usual exceptions aside) continue as a form of social inheritance" (p. 387). We as educators today have to reflect critically on that inheritance, and choose models of delivery that foreground productive learning, without fear of change or chaos in the transition away from a largely classroom-based school model. Blended learning needs to be considered as a pathway to meaningful learning in general education contexts, not just as a stopgap measure, or an option that only works selectively.

PIE, as a school that already acts like a blended learning school (in spite of the label of DL that it wears), is a meaningful example of what this looks like, and I will comment on some of its characteristics at various points.

Personalized Education in Blended Learning

One of the strongest recent developments in education is based on a concept that was highly supported by educational theorist and philosopher John Dewey – that of student-centred or personalized education. Dewey (1938), in relation to the need for teacher planning of lessons and daily activities in the classroom, referred to the importance of the individual experience and needs of the student in affecting that planning:

> …[T]here is incumbent upon the educator the duty of instituting a much more intelligent, and consequently more difficult, kind of planning. [The teacher] must

> survey the capacities and needs of the particular set of individuals with whom he is dealing and must at the same time arrange the conditions which provide the subject-matter or content for experiences that satisfy these needs and develop these capacities. The planning must be flexible enough to permit *free play for individuality of experience* [italics mine] and yet firm enough to give direction towards continuous development of power. (p. 58)

This aspect of individualization of experience is related to the quest and need for personal meaning in life. In the classic "hierarchy of needs" developed by Maslow (McLeod, 2020), the need for self-actualization is on the higher order end of the needs spectrum; "the need for personal growth and discovery…is present throughout a person's life…In self-actualization, a person comes to find a meaning to life that is important to them" (p. 9). Another way of looking at self-actualization is to use the term 'agency': Zhao, Emler, Snethen and Yin (2019) refer to a lack of inquiry-driven, experiential, agentic learning as "one of the most pervasive components of the education crisis" (p. 116), leading students to feel a lack of relevance and engagement in learning. Conversely, "[w]hen students have agency, they engage in and direct their own learning, actively participating in school as opposed to passively accumulating information" (p. 115).

Centering the student rather than the curriculum in a learning environment is still a radical departure for many educators, who are focused on the need to communicate certain knowledge, skills and processes to students, and often at a certain age or stage of life and schooling. Within a bricks-and-mortar environment, in which classrooms are set up for same-age teaching, a set curriculum must be presented to students during each school year, and the sheer weight of expectation and tradition often still overwhelms any desire or temptation on the part of

teachers to tailor their lessons or daily schedule to individual student interests. It can seem impossible to actually give voice and agency to learners in terms of what they want to learn or do while at school.

Zhao, in his book *Reach for Greatness* (2018), lays out an ambitious and clear thesis for educators, which includes a warning: a focus on standardized tests in education, and an insistence on placing students on the normal curve in academic performance regardless of their individual strengths and weaknesses, will ensure that the school system fails students. Delivering a "one size fits all" model of education (Zhao, 2019, p. 113) will never result in engaged learning, but focusing on passions and strengths rather than deficits will allow for a personalizable model of encouragement and celebration of each student. Zhao says:

> All children have the potential and need to become great…we need an education that starts from the child's passions and strengths, instead of prescribed skills and content….As adults, we need to create an education that supports and helps children to take control of their education, to make education personalizable…this gives back to students the agency of learning; makes them co-owners of the education institution; is flexible so as to accommodate changes and individual needs; and has a strong culture that celebrates value creation so students can learn to use their passions, strengths, and efforts to serve the world beyond themselves. (2018, p. 69)

Linked to Zhao's argument is that of Todd Rose, who writes in *The End of Average* (2016) that "no one is average. Not you. Not your kids….Human potential is nowhere near as limited as the systems we have put in place assume. We just need the tools to understand each person as an individual, not as a data point on a bell curve" (p. 11, 14).

In his book *Creative Schools* (2015), Ken Robinson expands on the ideas and principles that swept virally around the globe when he gave his TED talk on creativity, and his fervent belief that education in schools needed to be made to fit children, not children made to fit schools. He says in this book, "We all have a wide range of natural aptitudes, and we all have them differently. Personalization means teachers taking account of these differences in how they teach different students. It also means allowing for flexibility within the curriculum so that in addition to what all students need to learn in common, there are opportunities for them to pursue their individual interests and strengths as well" (p. 88). This does reflect the fact that in most schools and districts, blended learning must still follow a standardized curriculum, though with freedom to add or substitute some content or curricular goals; it is not a blank check to develop completely personalized education.

In another approach to personalized learning, Bray and McClaskey (2015) discuss "learner-driven schools," and the defining features of personalization, differentiation, and individualization. In their view, individualization is still teacher-driven, and characterized by assessment *of* learning – this conceptualization of personalized learning would fit the creation of Individual Education Plans (IEPs) rather than authentically transforming education for all students. Differentiation allows the teacher to modify group instruction in order to more thoughtfully meet the learning needs of different students, but is again focused on teacher planning; this approach uses assessment *of* and *for* learning in planning lessons. According to Bray and McClaskey, then, it is through personalization that a student becomes a true self-directed, reflective and mastery-oriented learner, with assessment focused both *as* and *for* learning, with little of the summative assessment *of* learning (p. 10).

Larry Cuban, an education historian and school reform thinker, is actively involved in thinking about personalized learning, and what that means in schools, though his education blog. In looking at this topic, he muses about what the phrase "personalized learning" really refers to: "Is it updated 'competency-based learning'? Or 'differentiated learning' in new clothes, or 'individualized learning' redecorated?...'Blended learning', 'project-based teaching', and '21st Century skills' are [also] a few of the recent bumper stickers…" (2016, para. 1). As Barnett Berry points out, Cuban has answered these questions by describing "the variations of how schools are implementing personalized learning. At one end of the spectrum are traditional age-graded schools with teacher-centred tools for 'using behavioural approaches that seek efficient and effective learning'. At the other end of the spectrum are student-centred programs that 'shape how children grow cognitively, psychologically, emotionally, and physically' and avoid lock-step curriculum and grading" (2016, p. 3).

In discussing an educational framework that they call "pathways to personalization," Rubin and Sanford (2018) express what keeps coming up over and over again in the literature on personalized learning: there is no right way to develop this model or methodology, and therefore what is important at this stage in educational thinking about Cuban's 'personalized learning spectrum' is the recognition that "updating our one-size-fits-all system to meet the specific needs of the students we serve" (p. 1) is the most important challenge we face, and personalization is the key. As Rubin and Sanford define it, "Personalized learning is a process and series of decisions schools and districts make" (p. 1), all geared towards meaningful mastery learning at a personal pace and accessing individual interests. In their view, "[t]he terms *blended* and *personalized* learning remain largely amorphous and have the power to energize or polarize

depending on the audience" (p. 9) – so it's fine to define the terms as well as possible, but not to get caught up in definitions.

In short, personalized learning, like blended learning, should be customized to each local context, and developed on a spectrum as needed. Personalized learning should itself be personalized to its distinct milieu, taking advantage of school and district cultures, educator strengths and interests, and student and family needs and foci.

Referring again to Horn and Staker's *Blended* (2015), conceived as a field guide to disruptive innovation, the authors draw a line of purpose between "personalized and competency-based learning…as the basis of a student-centered learning system" and blended learning; in their view, "This is why blended learning is so important. Blended learning is the engine that can power personalized and competency-based learning….It provides a simple way for students to take different paths toward a common destination." (p. 10) If shaking up the culture of a school to critically implement blended learning principles such as the use of both in-class and out-of-class learning time (whether strictly online or otherwise), the meaningful use of technology, and other factors such as self-assessment and formative assessment rather than summative assessment, for example, then it would be difficult not to accept blended learning as a path to engaged and self-actualized personalized learning.

All of these models of personalized learning – some of which would most fittingly belong in a blended learning setting, and some which could and do have great usefulness and meaning in a more traditional bricks-and-mortar setting as well – contribute to a more holistic picture of education in 2020. The message around personalized learning seems to be that the structures of school that we take for granted, such as top-down curricular decisions, and age- and grade-related tasks and bundles of knowledge (e.g. the Battle of the Plains of Abraham must be taught

in Grade 8 in most provinces in Canada), are no longer truly relevant, and must be reconsidered in light of recent research and theoretical thinking. It bears repeating: some of the students who are most benefiting from personalization of learning have not had an opportunity to experience it until the Covid-19 pandemic kept them from their classrooms, and they and their families are now experiencing a renewed enthusiasm for learning outside of the parameters of time and space in a classroom, and new success in learning as well.

Blended learning is not the only way to bring personalized education to the forefront of educational change, but it is a much more flexible and malleable model than most; teachers can allow for much greater leeway in their guidance of students, without worrying about losing time, or letting the achievement gap widen beyond repair.

Self-Determined Learning as a Factor of Blended Learning

There are some important links between the ideas of self-determined learning and personalized learning, in that both of these models foreground the student at the centre of the learning process. Self-determined learning puts the focus on developing student agency, autonomy, and goal-attainment, rather than on discovering and utilizing personal interests and strengths in order to make education meaningful and engaging. However, without developing the skills of advocacy and confident action, a student will be much less likely to take advantage of the benefits of personalizing learning, and especially in a blended learning setting. Great research has been done in the area of self-determined learning, and its related area of Self-Determination Theory (Carr, 2016; Deci & Flaste, 1995; Deci & Ryan, 2002; Ryan & Deci, 2017; Wehmeyer, 2007; Wehmeyer & Field, 2007; Wehmeyer, Abery, Mithaug, & Stancliffe, 2003; Wehmeyer & Zhao, 2020). Self-Determination Theory (SDT) holds that types of motivation exist “along a continuum from controlled to autonomous,” and that people thrive in

relation to the way that "social-contextual factors support or thwart…the satisfaction of their basic psychological needs for competence, relatedness, and autonomy" (Ryan & Deci, 2017, p. 3). Ryan and Deci (2017) also state, "Substantial evidence shows that autonomy-supportive versus controlling teaching strategies foster more autonomous forms of motivation in students and the higher quality engagement, performance, and positive experience associated with it" (p. 351). In schools in which autonomy, mastery, and intrinsic motivation are actively supported and even taught, there is a much higher expectation of "intellectual and personal flourishing of students as they move toward adult roles and identities" (p. 351).

In relation to blended learning, the issue of "autonomy versus control" is key; in discussing the results of a controlled study, Deci & Flaste (1995) write that "[p]eople who were asked to do a particular task but allowed the freedom of having some say in how to do it were more fully engaged by the activity – they enjoyed it more – than people who were not treated as unique individuals" (p. 33-34). They go on to say, "The main thing about meaningful choice is that it engenders willingness…it leaves them feeling as if you are responsive to them as individuals" (p. 34). In a school environment that allows for some choice in subject matter, pace of learning, method of demonstrating learning, and logistics of place, autonomy and competence are given much greater room to grow.

There is additional empirical support provided for the efficacy of SDT in education by Johnmarshall Reeve, who says, "The utility of applying self-determination theory to educational settings is now evident. Two decades of empirical work support the following two conclusions: (1) autonomously-motivated students thrive in educational settings, and (2) students benefit when teachers support their autonomy….It essentially means that students achieve highly, learn

conceptually, and stay in school in part because their teachers support their autonomy rather than control their behaviour" (2002, p. 183).

Michael Wehmeyer and Yong Zhao (2020) expand on this by listing three ways that self-determination is exhibited in students, which together underline the necessity of considering SDT in any educational plan. Self-determined learners:

> • Are the actors in their own lives. They make or cause things to happen in their lives, rather than other people or circumstances making or causing them to act in other ways.
>
> • Are autonomously motivated to seek opportunities and experiences that enable them to reach personal goals that improve their life satisfaction and to shape their world to improve their lives.
>
> • Become more engaged and active in learning and in maintaining positive mental health, rather than being passive and anxious. (p. 18)

This connection between autonomy and self-determination, and engagement and active learning, is made clear when SDT is taken into account.

Lastly, however, it's important to also keep in mind that Self-Determination Theory does not make choice synonymous with genuine autonomy in education, as Carr (2016) points out. As he says,

> [P]olicymakers should be careful not to presume that simple provision of choice in relation to how individuals go about pursuing the same instrumental educational goals automatically indicates autonomy-supportive educational

> practice. According to SDT, a system genuinely concerned with fostering autonomy *must* involve support for learning experiences that are perceived by individuals to be congruent with the self and fully identified with – not simply the provision of choice about how to go about pursuing externally imposed goals. (p. 110)

Thus, in thinking about the place of self-determined learning in a blended learning setting, there are two things that must be kept in mind: first, self-determination is a vital and essential part of a genuine movement towards engagement, motivation and self-direction for students, all of which are priorities for success in a more lightly structured setting such as blended learning. And second, policies that put blended learning into place at a district or provincial level, with the expressed purpose of foregrounding self-determined learning, but which restrict authentic educational choices, will not succeed, and worse, will be seen to be half-measures without full support. Meaningful blended learning should look like self-determined learning in its purpose and methods.

Flexibility in Delivery in Blended Learning: Time, Place, and Technology

If blended learning is truly to expand and succeed in B.C. during the Covid-19 'return to school stages', and after, and especially if it is to be allowed to fill the space that may be left by the closing of some DL schools, then there must be a true commitment to principles of flexible learning. The culture of bricks-and-mortar schools is firmly entrenched, for both good and bad reasons. An empirically unjustifiable reason for maintaining a system of school buildings, classrooms, bell schedules, and discrete school-based roles is that this is the way things have been done for over a hundred years. It is more rational to bring up the point that schools do serve a custodial function that enables the economic engine of society to continue to move, as parents

need to know that their children are taken care of during work hours. There is also a social function involved, in that students gain greatly from interactions with peers, multi-age friends, and adults in a school day. However, in times of societal crisis (e.g., a global pandemic) or individual crisis (e.g., overwhelming anxiety, inclusivity needs that are not being met), many families find that their need has led them to the best place for productive and meaningful learning – outside the bounds of educational time and place.

Time is an integral and meaningful concept in education. Raymond Callahan, in his important book, *Education and the Cult of Efficiency* (1962), described the way that business and industrial models of efficiency and motion study became part of the American social system. He says, "Although scientific management employed many identifiable and characteristic mechanisms, its most prominent tool was a stopwatch, the popular symbol of the scientific management movement. The stopwatch symbolized the new approach to management: 'management based on measurement' (p. 28). Engineers such as Frederick W. Taylor and Frank Gilbreth developed systems of time management for steel factories and other assembly line jobs that enhanced the bottom line of the factory owners, at the expense of the workers, who were treated like cogs in a machine. The Taylor system's disinterest in anything except the "one best way of doing any job" (Callahan, 1962, p. 29) meant that productivity and increased reliance on technology became a much bigger part of the work life of many Americans. Eventually, this 'cult of efficiency' spread to education, though without the painstaking research methods that had gone into the systems changes in factories. Based on not much educational experience or understanding, if any, a few businessmen decided that schools needed to be more efficient, and should adopt the factory model – with students as the "raw material of the business of education" (Callahan, 1962, p. 62). Efficiency turned out to mean 'dollar value' in the eyes of these men, so

education began following the drumbeat of budgets. Cost analysis became something that school administrators had to take into account, and ever since, the fact that we have a certain number of minutes of instructional time allotted for every day, of every month, of every school year, is a statistic that every superintendent can quote, and most teachers as well. We have long thought that we're guaranteeing a 'good' education to children by promising to keep them in classrooms for each of those minutes, but the factory mindset, with its hierarchies of management, and with children at the bottom of the scale of importance and teachers not far behind, have meant that collegiality and moral commitment to teaching and learning often took a back seat to economic factors, as far back as the 1920s. Teacher salaries were cut, class sizes grew in many cases, and classical studies like languages were cut – with consequences for American education that Callahan deems "tragic" (1962, p. 244).

The brilliant scholar of time, Barbara Adam, has addressed the "commodification of time" (2004, p. 124), and describes the temporal fate our modern society has acquiesced to:

> As it is measured and worked into our social relations, decontextualized and disembodied, clock time facilitates an acute present-orientation and a sense of distance, disconnection, independence even from the physical world and external influences. When a machine time, which has no consequences, no cause and effect, no accumulation, no irreversible change, no memory and no purpose, is employed as a synchronizing and organizational tool, an illusionary set of temporal relations are set in motions that become real in their lived consequences. In factories, people synchronized to the clock-time rhythm come to be treated as appendages to the machine. The machine time gets elevated as the norm to which they are expected to perform. Children are educated in accordance with its

> mechanistic beat. Public life is regulated to its invariable rhythm. Accuracy and precision, punctuality and the regularity of the clockwork become the socially valued ideals of conduct. (p. 115-116)

In reflecting on Adams' poetic wake-up call to the place we have given time in our social organization, there is a sense of permission and relief in the determination of some students, parents, and schools to step away from the control and colonization that educational time has been imbued with, and to reclaim the role of play, rest, individual pace, and agency in how time is spent on school tasks. Wajcman (2015) refers to this as well when she says, "The ability to choose how you allocate your time lies at the core of a positive notion of freedom" (p. 61), and she too points to "the tyranny of the clock, with its linear measurement of the hours of the day…It is as if technical devices incorporate functional time demands that determine unequivocally our uses of time" (p. 2).

In blended learning, which incorporates technology and out-of-class learning to some extent in every iteration, and which therefore allows for students to work at their own pace, at a time which works for their sleep rhythms or their families' work schedules, and which claims agency and autonomy over when and how school work gets done (within some parameters, of course), there is a flexibility in blended learning which can allow for more engaged and meaningful learning than in the structure of the school building and its schedule. Many families who choose blended learning or homeschooling do put structure into their children's school day, as order is important, but with that order comes a sense that the timeframe is the servant, not the master, of the educational plan.

A recent Education Week article addressed this question in light of the labour issues surrounding a potential return to school in August across the U.S. - but again from a distance,

due to the Covid-19 lockdown in the state as of July 2020. The author wonders, “If you can no longer realistically orient teachers’ duties and expectations in terms of a seven-and-a-half hour day – or six periods and one prep – how do you do it?” (Sawchuk, April 28, 2020, para. 2) The question is answered in a way that would have been unthinkable pre-Covid, in the light of traditional school structure and the need for labour unions to support each other in maintaining work/life boundaries outside of school: “What have emerged are more flexible arrangements for teachers. The actual amount of time teachers are expected to instruct on a daily or weekly basis is shorter. But they must reserve specific times for ‘office hours,’ when they are available to help students and parents individually” (para. 3).

Blended learning requires a willingness to think outside the box of school as we have done it for decades, although it is also true that blended learning can easily become the next ‘box’ itself. It is best to think of it as an organic response to felt and expressed need in students, families and teachers, bounded and supported by district leadership that also sees the need, and is committed to going out of their way to try something new and untested, or who feels enough of the panic and emptiness of the struggle with the present uncertainty around school, to make that the deciding factor in bringing blended learning into the mix.

Just as time as a social construct has made its way into education, place and space have also taken up residence in our mindsets as educators. It is very difficult to think outside the literal box of a bricks-and-mortar school, when supplies, supports, familiarity, and especially control over a classroom of students, are synonymous for many educators with the school building. In the Vancouver Island campus of PIE, we have been fortunate to develop a school culture without a district-owned bricks-and-mortar building, due partly to the in-person time teachers spend together, perpetuating the way we relate to students as learners and the freedom and

personalization within the blended learning setting we allow, and partly to the time we spend with students during in-class time together on a rotating supervision schedule each week. This is optional time for students, but teachers welcome the opportunity to visit with students in person. However, the greatest carrier of school culture has been a school retreat that happens each year at a camp about two hours away from the community where most school families live. Parents, students and siblings are welcome; all of the teachers are there, and end up spending long amounts of time visiting with families, having some report visits with students who have work to show, minimally supervising some activities, but mostly just spending time together as a school community. The students roam around the 100-acre property from dawn to dusk, connecting with new and old friends, feeling part of a loose group of like but not like 'classmates', and creating a sense of belonging. The retreat is always a success, no matter the weather; all new PIE students are told that they *have* to be there every year, and all the returning students spend the whole next year talking about the retreat and what they plan to do the following year. It's a good example of the bonds of belonging that are formed outside of a daily classroom or building experience, and the fact that school can look and feel like school without the floors and walls, if by school we mean a community of learners.

In an edited volume of short writings on education called *Everywhere All the Time: A New Deschooling Reader* (2008), the contributing authors all fall somewhere along the spectrum of unschoolers or deschoolers or homeschoolers or alternative schoolers; Ivan Illich is there, John Holt, Leo Tolstoy, and John Taylor Gatto, as well as many more. For the most part they make the case that school as we know it is doing a disservice to our children. Hern refers to deschooling as "social freedom" from "monopoly state schooling and compulsory education" (2008, p. 115), but he doesn't advocate for a complete lack of education of any sort for children.

Rather, he proposes the concept of "counter-institutions", so that children can find a place to encounter people outside of their own families, be exposed to different ideas, and engage with the community. He says,

> We need a viable, publicly-supported and broadly articulated homeschooling movement so that pretty much any family can make homelearning work. But we also need networks of learning centres, community projects, libraries, youth centres, parks, pools, gyms, playgrounds, and museums of every variety….It just can't be right that having kids stuck inside institutions, confined to classrooms of thirty peers for five days a week, six hours a day, ten months a year, for twelve years of their childhood is the best way for kids to be spending their time. (p. 115-116)

Hern goes on to say that as long as everyday school life continues to look the same – students filing into a building every morning, and out again every afternoon – the driver of need is the institution, not the student: "Contemporary pedagogical thinking is almost entirely constrained by classroom requirements….Students are required to fit into the apparatus of school days, times, schedules, agendas, curricula, and class order, and it is their flexibility and adaptivity that is assumed, not the institutions'. Why do we demand that children fit into schools and not the other way around?" (Hern, 2008, p. 117)

Hern's message of a radical reimagining of the practice of schooling in our society seems idealistic, a pipe-dream of education as a fully-integrated part of a neighbourhood and community. However, I have seen this kind of schooling work, and most countries in the world are preparing to adjust to some form of part-time-only physical presence in a classroom, if not for a fully virtual school experience, again this fall. Intentional blended learning models could

provide a way for schools and districts to look critically at what has not been working in terms of productive and engaged learning, and consider whether Hern's 'radical reimagining' of place and time within the school system might not be the way of the future.

Lastly in this section on blended learning's flexibility in relation to the social constructs of time and space in schooling, is the underlying and important use of technology in education, and the opportunities that it provides to learn at a distance. This learning can be done synchronously or asynchronously, with a combination of audio and video in order to connect to classmates and teachers, or can consist of emails or texts to a teacher, or watching historical vignettes or TED talks online as part of a project. Allan Collins (2017) urges the creation of a new vision for schools and curriculum in the light of 21st century needs in the Age of Technology, where what is studied is based on interests, skills, and dispositions, rather than age- or grade-level requirements. He envisions a "passion curriculum" which "embodies authentic tasks and assessments, a dual focus on the teaching of particular competencies in the context of accomplishing meaningful tasks, development of deep skills and knowledge, peer teaching and mentoring, and a learning cycle of planning, doing, and reflecting...[in order to] better prepare students for the complex world they are entering" (p. 105).

Without a vision by educators and thinkers who are willing to step outside the usual constraints of site-based schooling, and who see the possibilities in moving away from a classroom model, at least part-time, it is too easy to choose the status quo of structure, predictability and control. An article was put out by the NCEE (National Center on Education and the Economy) on how distance learning was approached in the past few months in response to the Covid-19 pandemic, in a few high-performing jurisdictions around the world (June 2020). They noted, "This year, widespread school closures due to the coronavirus pandemic have

required almost all high-performing systems to implement distance learning to ensure that students continue learning" (p. 1). One of their findings was that in Singapore, their education system had proactively developed an emergency distance learning system in case of a public health threat, which included teacher training, the development of tools and resources, and annual practice sessions in distance learning. This is more than just thorough planning, though it is an impressive example of just that. It is also a marker of an entire school system's ability to conceptualize a version of school that looks and acts differently, in order to best facilitate the aims of productive student learning. Putting systems in place that allow for flexibility and change in the midst of crisis, but also in the long term, would be a deeply meaningful outcome of this public health crisis.

Inclusivity in Blended Learning

No discussion of education today, whether in a traditional classroom setting and structure, or in a distance or blended learning model, would be complete without a serious consideration of inclusion as an embedded value. In most subject areas in educational literature, there is mention of IDEA – the Individuals with Disabilities in Education Act in the U.S. – which encompasses six principles of inclusive education. Enacted in 1975, it provides for a free and appropriate public education for any students with disabilities, the right to be educated in the least restrictive environment possible, and the right to an Individual Education Plan, or IEP. It also guarantees parent participation in education decisions, as well as appropriate assessment for each child, and procedural safeguards to ensure equity for all children in their educational setting (IDEA). In Canada, every provincial jurisdiction provides for students with disabilities, and an IEP is mandated in B.C. for every student with a special education (or learning support) designation. In PIE, this is a large part of our student population; many students who struggle

with a traditional school setting because of their learning challenge or disability or behaviour challenges have come to PIE, as a DL/blended learning school that can provide a strong public education, with a focus on relationship and support from teachers and other students and parents, as well as Ministry of Education funding for students with designations (as is the case for students in any form of schooling in B.C.).

There is an increasing understanding in education today, however, that a piecemeal approach to students with special education designations – and even the term 'special education' - are retrograde concepts that create silos around students with disabilities, and that instead a culture of inclusion must be built and then nurtured. It is recognized that school leaders have to take into account the "multiple aspects of…identities" held by members of a school community when they consider the complex system that is each individual school, and the array of "exceptionalities, abilities, and disabilities" which are to be found in any group of people (Theoharis & Scanlan, 2015, p. ix).

James Ryan (2006) discusses inclusivity in education in light of school leadership, as leaders are in a position to create and promote a culture of safety, affection, and shared decision-making around inclusion. He addresses the reality that school can be a place of exclusion for children (and even adults), and asks us to "imagine what it must feel like when exclusion is repeated time and again, when it is systematic, when your ethnicity, skin color, gender, sexual orientation, financial position, or body shape result in you being excluded over and over" (p. 9). Any formal structure needs to be critically examined in terms of the "access people get to societal systems…participation in decision-making and political processes, to employment and material resources, and to common cultural processes like education? … [E]veryone deserves to be included fairly in all systems and practices of school and society" (Ryan, 2006, p. 15).

This also brings us back to a consideration of personalized education in the case of students with disabilities: if we prioritize and fiercely protect a child's right to achieve their potential as individuals, then we will abide by the principles of special education, and fully support each child's inclusion and place in our schools. We will move from thinking of students with designations and disabilities as 'other' and instead allow them the right to be great in whatever way works for them, and that allows for true learning and relationship in the school community. As Zhao (2018) says, "Teaching for greatness…is not about only teaching to students' strengths or interests. It is really about a broad and flexible education for students to explore, experiment with, and enhance their strengths and passions. It is not focusing on fixing their deficits as determined by external standards and tests" (p. 81).

In the case of PIE, I have seen first-hand the opportunity that a blended learning school provides for creating a culture of inclusion. Because of the flexible learning environment, the issues of time and space do not get in the way of learning or belonging for students with designations. Students with learning disabilities are not being pulled out of a bricks-and-mortar classroom for remedial reading groups, for instance, and experiencing the embarrassment of being singled out as a struggling learner. Students who need more time to learn, or to complete assignments, are fully supported in doing so, since all students are learning at their own pace, and there is no stigma attached to choosing to demonstrate learning at a slower pace or in a more simplistic way than others. Students who need a reader or a scribe for assessments are able to access those supports in a private setting. And students who need adaptive technology are able to access it at home or in a smaller learning environment, without fear of bothering others with text to speech technology, for example. Learning support teachers in PIE are able to meet the needs of learning support students in a much more direct and personalized way than is often possible in

a school setting, and with a sense of partnership with family and other students that is a function of a home setting, or just a smaller face-to-face group. I have gradually come to realize that in PIE's blended learning structure, the conversation around inclusion does not sound the same; instead of a discussion of 'mainstreaming' or making sure that students who are differently abled are encouraged to 'fit in', my conversation starts from a position of having a level playing field in our school. Every student is granted the equal opportunity of personalized learning, autonomy and agency in their learning, and support in growing in self-determined learning. Inclusion is the starting line, and students with designations are all making their way within the school community, with the learning support they need. The fact that our community is made up of very diverse personalities, with plenty of quirkiness and a refusal or an inability to be anything other than who they are, has also helped create that culture of acceptance and inclusion. For any students, the chances are slim to none that they will find themselves judged or bullied, and if that happens, the school expectations of zero tolerance are communicated quickly and clearly.

The beauty of diversity can more easily be supported in a multi-age school, with personalized learning as the norm rather than the exception, in my experience.

II. What Aspects of Leadership Through Change Are Needed in Educational Settings?

Leadership Models to Address Sea Change

In considering the massive amount of change that education systems are undergoing right now in preparation for a school start-up in the fall, I am incredibly grateful for the established DL model in my own school, and I am hopeful that the teachers and administrators in PIE can continue to reach out to help support schools in our district and neighbouring districts with their transition plans. I am also hopeful that the Ministry of Education realizes that DL and blended

learning schools in B.C. are uniquely poised to continue to make a positive contribution to B.C.'s education system. If even a relatively small number of families and students can address their learning and support needs through DL schools, it will be of benefit to the system as a whole. However, there is still the potential that PIE will need to make a shift, sooner rather than later, away from the more flexible format of DL to a more structured blended learning model. If that happens, there are three considerations of leadership in the midst of change that would be of value and effectiveness for our school administrative team and teachers, as well as our district leaders.

1. **Critical reflection**

Critical reflection seems like a fairly intuitive response to the need for leadership in the midst of change, but the literature on change and leadership speaks more than once to the importance of reflecting critically on the problems that need to be solved, rather than rushing into new plans or systems. Margaret Wheatley, with her beautiful discussions about bringing order into the chaos of change, mentions this reflective approach to organizational change: "It is the nature of life to organize into patterns….we need to figure out the values and agreements that we think will support…new behaviours…This work requires awareness, patience, and generosity…To do this, we have to develop much greater awareness of how we're acting; we have to become far more self-reflective than normal" (2006, p. 130). Critical self-reflection can "speak with a simple clarity to issues of effective leadership. They recall us to the power of simple governing principles: guiding visions, sincere values, organizational beliefs…The leader's task is first to embody these principles, and then to help the organization become the standard it has declared for itself" (Wheatley, 2006, p. 130).

Ryan (2006) also references critical reflection as part of the process of dialogue within a school leadership community; he urges teacher leaders and administrators to critically reflect on their experiences in order to learn from them. In a school with a culture of inclusion, or in a school struggling with the challenges of exclusion, Ryan points out that in order to move forward into meaningful change, there must be a sense of critical consciousness in order to reflect on ideas and practices (p. 114). In contexts of inclusive leadership, or in general work to build authenticity and trust as leaders and community members, the idea of reflection as informing action is an important one.

In Peter Senge's *Schools That Learn* (2012), the importance of critical reflection, and its place in educational leadership, is addressed. In a piece entitled "Guiding Principles for School Leaders Facing Transformation," Cambron-McCabe and Quantz (2012) say this:

> Educational practice must be informed by critical reflection – reflection situated in the cultural, political, and moral context of school. We wanted to teach people to be... "reflective practitioners" – to reflect on their work…in a systematic way but always within the context of culture, politics, and ethics….[A]s leaders, we also learn from systematic and informed reflection – for example, thinking through ways in which different groups can be engaged and connecting those ways to theories of organizational development. Critical reflection is more than just reflection. It is reflection that ties practice and theory together. (p. 356)

This passionate call to critically reflect on best practices for leaders who are in the midst of change is heartening. In the crux of a crisis like the Covid pandemic, thoughtful and measured responses are going to make a difference to schools and to groups of leaders. As PIE enters the fall semester, with new staff, many new families, and some uncertainty about our school's future,

I plan to both practice and encourage critical reflection of the ways we can help our school and district face the challenges of the fall, as well as thinking creatively and positively about what an eventual transition to a new model of school could mean for our school community.

2. **Collaborative/collective leadership**

In educational settings there has been a tradition of hierarchical leadership, moving from the office of the superintendent of the district, to the lowly teacher, at the nadir of mechanistic views of education in the 1910s, ‘20s, and ‘30s (Callahan, 1962). There is still a strong flavour of traditional hierarchy in many educational milieus, and although critical reflection is a good practice for checking attitudes and actions, it will take effort and intentionality to work together to perpetrate change. It is increasingly clear in the literature on educational leadership that theories of collaborative and collective leader models are gaining empirical and practical validity and support.

An excellent definition of collective leadership comes from Jonathan Eckert. He says, “[E]ducation leadership requires teachers and administrators to work together toward shared organizational goals…. ‘Collective leadership encompasses the practise through which teachers and administrators influence colleagues, policymakers, and others to improve teaching and learning’…it emphasizes joint goal setting and strategic implementation of those goals in the service of the primary purpose of schools – teaching and learning” (2019, p. 478). There is no need for individualism of purpose if the shared vision of student learning and professional growth is greater than the need for power or recognition on the part of school leaders.

In discussing school change in the context of encouraging research, self-scrutiny and independent evaluation, Sarason (1996) also spoke for the necessity of “a professional collegiality that is other than a sometime thing. Collegiality is more than a form of friendly

togetherness. It represents a willing desire to learn from each other and to assume the responsibility to be knowledgeable about the ideas, efforts, and writing of people who, like themselves, have devoted their energies to the goals of improving schools as well as the field profession" (p. 354). This is an excellent reminder that good staff relationships need to go deeper than positive conversations in the staff room, but need to lead to professional conversations about change, and willingness to work together to improve the school. I have mentioned a few times that our culture of collegiality as teachers and administrators in PIE is strong, and I believe that is one of the reasons that we have been a cutting-edge school in many ways. It is not that we have made waves in the world of B.C. DL schools for any startling innovations, but that we have steadily increased enrollment, built relationships with school and district staff in other districts as well as our own, and generally created a culture of student-centred learning that draws students from increasingly far away; this can only be sustained because of the very strong teacher and administrator culture of support, communication, and learning and growth as a staff.

Peter Northouse, in his textbook consideration of leadership (2019), refers to "team-oriented leadership," which allows for "team building and a common purpose among team members. This kind of leadership includes being collaborative, integrative, diplomatic, nonmalevolent, and administratively competent" (p. 446). In a school intent on making any changes, the many other types and theories of leadership covered by Northouse in his book are not strikingly appealing in an educational setting, at least at the school level; a sense of commonality and collegiality is essential, in contrast to top-down, 'great leader' approaches.

Linda Darling-Hammond et al talk about principals "being first among a society of equals in the practical and improvisational practice of school-based improvement" (2017, p. 169), and Eckert (2019) mentions the need for humble leaders: "Because being a catalyst requires humility,

the principals and their leadership teams are primarily composed of humble educators who are interested in supporting teachers in their work" (p. 499). This builds teacher capacity, and in turn allows for meaningful and collaborative change in educational settings.

Andy Hargreaves and Michael Fullan have written about professional capital as made up of leaders in the education profession taking collective responsibility for transformative change in education, building on the strengths that are inherent in working together as teachers and administrators, rather than pulling against each other. They say, "Whole system change…is not a kind of magic. It involves and absolutely requires individual and collective acts of investment in an inspirational vision and a coherent set of actions that build everyone's capability and keep everyone learning as they continue to move forward" (2012, p. xvii). This is a goal worth pulling together for, and with implications for profound change coming out of school- and district-level movement and growth.

3. **Communities of Practice**

Lastly, the formation and foregrounding of communities of practice in processes of change and growth in education is an exciting and thoughtful way of looking at collective leadership practice. Etienne Wenger describes "communities of practice" as "formed by people who engage in a process of collective learning in a shared domain of human endeavor" and as "groups of people who share a concern or a passion for something they do and learn how to do it better as they interact regularly" (Wenger, n.d., p. 1). The framework and foundation of communities of practice – joint activities and discussions, learning relationships, problem solving, coordination and synergy, and mapping knowledge and identifying gaps, to name a few – are all present in my educational context; PIE teachers and administrators treat every single staff meeting as a professional development opportunity, perhaps because we don't see each other in a building

every day. I can attest to the lived truth of Wenger's description of communities of practice as allowing us to "see past more obvious formal structures such as organizations, classrooms, or nations, and perceive the structures defined by engagement in practice and the informal learning that comes with it" (n.d., p. 3).

Conclusion

In conclusion, the culture of a school such as PIE can both flourish and undergo transformational change if it can meaningfully embody the belief in and practice of personalized learning; an understanding of the theory and practice of self-determined learning; the use of flexible methods of delivery in relation to time, space and technology in schooling; and a commitment to inclusive practices in education, while fitting into either a distributed learning or a blended learning model. In addition, if the models of leadership during that transformational change encompass a commitment to critical reflection; an embrace of collective leadership; and a continuing plan to make use of communities of practice, the process of change can lead to new growth, strength, and creativity, rather than a breaking of the systems of organization and relationship PIE is built on.

Margaret Wheatley refers to cycles of change, which provide alternating patterns of chaos and order in the natural world, and in the midst of our organization and planning as well. While we look ahead to the potential for great uncertainty and pain around the start of school in September, and know that we will be dealing with the anxiety of parents and students, and colleagues as well, and as I look ahead to the possibility of a change in the order, structure, and stability of my school's system of being, I am reminded of her words in relation to what we can observe in the quantum universe:

> Our concept of organizations is moving away from the mechanistic creations that flourished in the age of bureaucracy. We now speak in earnest of more fluid, organic structures, of boundaryless and seamless organizations. We are beginning to recognize organizations as whole systems, construing them as "learning organizations" or as "organic"…possessing the same capacity to adapt and grow that is common to all life. (p. 15)

If we don't grow, we are in the process of dying, and change reminds us of the growth that we are experiencing. Remembering that education is not meant to be static, and opening ourselves to welcome a level of disorder leading to growth along the way, will lead us to a greater appreciation of the new learning and forms of organization and meaning when they do come – a reminder that I will take with me into the new school year.

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