



After Immunity: Understanding the Post-COVID-19 World¹

Episode One: Inequality After Immunity

Interview with Jonathan Berrington

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Ian T. D. Thomson [IT]: To explore this topic I reached out to Jonathan Berrington, a psychologist for the Frontier School Division in Manitoba, the largest geographical school division in the province. He's also a very good friend of mine. Jon, thanks so much for coming on the show.

Jonathan Berrington [JB]: Thank you so much, Ian.

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IT: So I think a helpful place to start us off is kind of an idea about what you do. Can you describe to the listeners what your role as a psychologist is in Manitoba's education system and how you help kids in the division?

JB: Right, so I'm part of the student services team. So that means I'm a part of a team of three psychologists in the full division, but I work in just nine schools that are on the eastern side of the province. And so I travel back and forth between the all nine of them, by road, I fly to some of them, I stay over nights, and I work inside the schools working with teachers, parents, and with the kids. So mostly my work is with mental health, behaviors, and academic skills. So a big part is consultations. So if a teacher or parent is having some challenges, I can help consult with coming up with strategies and interventions for them. I do professional development, so I do courses and classes with teachers or with parents. I can run groups and interventions with the children. But the biggest part of my job is assessments, which is kind of like an investigation role. I feel like I'm a bit of a detective. I go into the school, I interview everybody, I do some observations, go through all the files, and then I do individual assessments with kids, to figure out their strengths and challenges to help better support them.

IT: Yeah, I think that it's a noble cause. You're a strong contributor, I think, to the school division and the school education system itself. Can you describe maybe a little bit about the role and the structure of the school itself? What can the structure of a school do to help a child who might be one of those children that you are assessing for

psychological needs? What can the structure of the school give to them who are facing those difficulties?

JB: Well, we know that structure and routine is incredibly important for development. And a school, a good school, is an ideal environment for a child to grow and develop because it has good structure, plenty of choice or freedom to learn, a lot of children their own age to interact with, to learn social skills, to learn important skills that the children will need when they grow up. So ideally, a school has all of the stuff that a child needs to develop in a healthy environment. A child needs structure, needs routine to develop properly. But there has to be that balance of structure and attachment, and choice because too much structure is bad and too little structure bad. And so a good school has that balance.

IT: Yeah, yeah. The balance between, as you said, the structure of a routine; going to math class, going to phys-ed, you know, versus the choice of maybe who you interact with on the playground. Is that kind of where you're heading at?

JB: Yeah, a school day is very routine. You go to school off the bus at the same time every day, you take your jacket off in the same way, you listen to *O Canada*, you stand, you have the morning announcements. All of these routines are consistent and that predictability is really important for a developing mind to grow. And then in the classroom, when you do the activities there's plenty of rewards and consequences that make sense, and that is important for development. But there's also that freedom of

choice; who to hang out with, do you answer in class, what do you do during recess and gym? There's that freedom as well that's equal. The balance is the key, of those two.

IT: So today's episode we are talking about inequality. The notion in a lot of public policy circles at that macro level is seeing public education as an essential service, a great equalizer [that provides] families of various income levels the ability to send their kids to a school with that structure in place (as we've talked about) knowing that there are certain standards in place, there are certain structures, [such as] the morning announcements at a specific time. But the pandemic's changed that obviously, you know, it's really thrown a curveball into that. In your view, what has been the impact, the effect of the pandemic, on children attending school? Particularly for the sort of children that you might work with personally.

JB: Right. It's a complete disruption of their routine. It's a disruption of just access to being with their teachers. If you think about a regular school day, you have a teacher that has a classroom of 20 to 30 kids for five and a half hours every day, but now from distance-wise that's impossible. A teacher can't see all of their kids every day, all the time, as long as they're working usual time. And so a lot of my kids in rural communities don't have the capability of accessing technology for Zoom lessons, they can't do that, right, there is no service for that. So they rely on teachers dropping off work, they rely on teachers coming and teaching lessons outside their door, or individual lessons, and you can't have the same amount of lessons, or the same amount of instructional time

that you usually would which is incredibly damaging. But then there's also a lack of services, too.

IT: I would just kind of like to focus in on that aspect that you talked about: the rural areas and the access to the formats that they need to have that structure in place. What are other reasons that children might not be able to attend school? Broadband issues come to mind, but are there any others that kind of limit the child's ability to get to a school and to get that structure that they need?

JB: Right. So a big piece is, say, transportation. The buses are a bit more difficult out rurally, sometimes parents don't have cars, they can't get the kids to school. That's a big piece, just getting to the school is difficult. The internet is probably the biggest piece. But also there's a big fear of COVID in rural communities. The concept of "if it comes in it will ravage the whole town", and we've seen it happen, it does happen all the time now. So there's a fear that if they send their kids to school that it's going to spread throughout the town, and so a lot of kids are held home, or stay home because parents are afraid. Reasonably afraid, but still.

IT: Yeah, well that's going to be precisely it. They're not going to send them because of that fear. And we are in the pandemic so to some extent it's a quite rational fear. And we have seen it, as you said, we have cases here in Manitoba where a case got out and it has ravaged the rural area. But of course, it does limit the child's ability to attend the school and to get that structure. So Jon, today we're talking, again, about inequality, the

access to education, particularly [for] those of lower income, and we're interested in how society might be different in the post-COVID-19 world. You know, Miles Corak, we talked with him about how children on the lower socioeconomic scale might suffer disproportionately [compared to others from] more privileged families. As a psychologist, what worries you about this? What worries you about kind of the long term effects of children not attending school because of this pandemic? Again, what would we see kind of in that post-COVID-19 world because of this?

JB: Well, if we started where we are now where kids in rural communities and poorer communities don't have as much access to clinical services. So they don't have speech therapy, occupational therapy, physiotherapy, psychology, counselling, all these therapies are not there nearly as much as, or as often, or as intensive as they should be. We take that into account. We take into account that they're missing a huge amount of school and learning time. So in the normal years there's a summer slide every year where children are at a certain point in June when they leave, and then they drop a little bit by the time September comes. But now this gap is huge. The summer is now a year long instead of two months, so there's going to be that dramatic decrease. We also know summer slides hit poorer students harder, and students with larger needs harder. Simply because of the lack of resources. You don't get tutoring as easily, these clinical services aren't as available. There are many, many reasons why the summer slide is strong, but now the effect is going to be that much more because of the time [students are] not there. Also, there's an incredible amount of stress. So we know that stress damages neurons, it hurts learning behavior, executive functioning. And children who

are in families with high stress feel that stress and that affects their learning, it affects their behaviors. And so the rural communities and poorer families have higher stress now, and so they're going to be disproportionately affected by this increase in stress.

IT: Yeah, yeah. Just on a side note, I always knew that this would be a heavier discussion just by the nature of the work and the seriousness of this inequality. But you talked about, this aspect of the loss of kind of education itself. And one of the things that is being talked about right now amongst parents is this idea that because of the pandemic's disruptions, because of this lack of adequately educating children, that they might have to repeat the grade just because they haven't achieved that educational standard in place. In your view, is this the correct assessment of how we should be looking at this? Has this been really a lost year in the children's education, or is it even more than that?

JB: Well, I guess it's kind of a tricky question that's in two pieces, but I'll answer the second part first about the lost year. And yes, for many students, it's going to be a lost year simply because of a lack of access to education. They can't, they're not at school. And yes, it will be more than a lost year because there's going to be a backlog, there's going to have to be catch up, there's going to be a drop. So it's going to be difficult to catch up. But kids are very resilient. Most children will catch up, most children might even thrive and do better afterwards. But you never know, and children in lower socioeconomic statuses tend to be hit harder by this, and so they might take longer to recover or might have really lasting effects, lasting ripple effects. But as for should we

repeat the year and hold kids back? This has been a debate for many, many years, long before COVID, "should we even hold kids back"? And the research is a little mixed, but it points towards "no, we shouldn't hold kids back". There [are] so many long term effects in retaining kids. From changing peer groups to self-esteem to what is what is gained by repeating a year. It can be sometimes more damaging than doing the year again, and so that's kind of why Canada has a bit of a policy of being very cautious about retaining kids, it's not often done. But then say we do retain kids, are we going to hold back everyone? Because that's not really fair, some kids are going to thrive, so we're not going to hold them back. Are we going to hold back just the kids who do poorly? Because then that's pretty damaging too, you're going to split classrooms, you're going to split communities, and that's not necessarily helpful either. So no, I don't think we should hold kids back, I don't think we should have a blanket statement of that because we don't know what those lasting effects could be, they could be even worse.

IT: That's very interesting, just because it sounds like, you know, "has this year been problematic? Absolutely. But that's not the correct solution to kind of undergo".

Because, you know, if we're talking about stability, if we're talking about structure, it might just disrupt them more. Is that that the correct way of kind of looking at this?

JB: Yeah, you're punishing a child for a mistake that they never made. More disruptions, more stress. How bad do you want to make this? It's already bad enough.

IT: Yeah, and that's precisely it, it's about how to kind of mitigate those problems. So, Jon, part of your job is to deal not only with the kids themselves, but the larger relations tied to the children. You talked about dealing with teachers, dealing with parents as well, and one aspect is the family dynamics at play here and those inequalities might come to the surface here. Dr. Miles Corak, in our interview, kind of talked a little bit about how, the labor market effects of, say, unemployment on parents can maybe echo into that next generation of the kids, again, if the family's income isn't adequately supported. Do you have any thoughts on this? On how kind of the parental success or difficulties might echo or might kind of affect the children's ability to succeed?

JB: We'll go back to that stress piece again, maybe a little bit, because these are micro-traumas that is happening. So families with lower incomes are experiencing thousands and thousands of micro-traumas which are damaging neurons, damaging the ability to learn, damaging ability to manage emotions and behaviors, and damaging health. And these effects are passed on, trauma is intergenerational. So these micro-traumas can build up to complex trauma and this complex trauma can be passed on genetically or through families. And so you might have ripple effects that go on for generations because of something like this. But also [I] don't want to be all doom and gloom, there [are] going to be kids who do thrive. There will be kids who are very resilient, but it's going to be disproportionate. The kids in lower income families are going to be hit harder than kids who are in richer families.

IT: So, Jon, I kind of want to switch directions a little bit in terms of what we've been talking about, and talk a little bit about Indigenous schools and communities. As a psychologist in the Frontier Division, you deal with public schools, but you also deal with First Nations schools. And Indigenous communities, obviously they face significant challenges during this time with the reported cases of COVID [being] greater on First Nations reserves and Indigenous peoples continue to face greater social and racial inequalities. As someone that takes part in helping First Nations schools, can you talk a little bit about these communities and the issues that Indigenous peoples have had to face during this pandemic?

JB: Well, the communities that I work with feel very forgotten. They feel forgotten by the rest of Manitoba. They're left alone and isolated. There's a huge lack of service. Just a kind of a side note, like I live in the city where I can order food to be dropped off to my house. I can do curbside pickup, I can do delivery, all these services protect me from COVID. But you can't in the reserves, they don't have the same services there. So it gets much harder to avoid each other, it gets much harder to avoid catching COVID because you have to travel to the city to get services or you have to have people come up into the reserves to get services. So that's a challenge in itself, but these communities are still impacted by the racism and judgment from the city. That is quite challenging, you've got to be compassionate about people who are forgotten in these towns that are under-serviced. With the boil water advisories, with the lack of internet, with the isolated communities. You've got to give them a little bit of a break, too.

IT: Yeah. We'll continue on, you mentioned you don't want to be seen all doom and gloom, and I do want to talk a little bit about supports and your thoughts on [them] and what could potentially be needed during this time. In your view, what supports would you like to see be used to address these kind of educational inequities as we move past the pandemic and as we enter that post-COVID-19 world? Again, what supports would you like to see?

JB: Well, the pandemic has really highlighted the need for technology. The access to Internet is incredible now, and I feel like COVID has just highlighted that piece. And so support-wise, communities need access to strong Internet service. The fact that I can do an assessment virtually with a child in a community with good internet but not in a community with poor internet is problematic. So we need to do that, that's a big piece. We need a lot of mental health support to go North, much more than we have now. Just therapy, and every piece. We're missing services, we have a gap of service now so now we need to bring up speech therapists, and occupational therapists, and physiotherapists, and mental health supports. Those need to go up. We can't just dump money on these communities, we need to be very, very strategic in how we provide those supports.

IT: It sounds less like it's just the idea of throwing money at the issue, and [more] actually utilizing that money to provide those mental health supports. Would that be kind of an accurate way of characterizing it?

JB: Yeah, we need to have a conversation with the communities and see what they want. You've got to talk with them and say "how do we make life better for you?". We can't just make decisions for them. And throwing money at them might seem like a temporary solution, but it's not going to help nearly as much as providing services, providing people to go there and stay long term, not just for a week.

IT: Yeah, and I kind of want to talk to you about that because, Jon, we've been friends for a while and I've got to say, you know, the number of times, you've been in your car driving up north, you're driving to these communities, you know, and and that's something that I think a lot of people don't understand. You know, it's not anything people [here] do. They're in the city, they're in Winnipeg, they work in Winnipeg and that's the extent of it. Or they work in Toronto, where they work in that city and they don't get exposed to the northern and rural communities to that extent. I guess what I'd like to to ask is; for those types of individuals, what do you think that they should know about in terms of kind of northern communities and rural communities? For someone that might not necessarily be exposed to the issues and challenges that they face.

JB: Well, there is a big fear, in Winnipeg we call it the "perimeter-itis". There's a fear of Winnipeggers leaving the perimeter, they're scared of moving outside of the city, of leaving the bounds of our town. And so there are very few people who are willing to go rurally and stay there long term. Maybe they'll go there for a year, or maybe they'll go there for two. But there's this constant turnaround of people coming in and out, and in and out, and so there's no consistency. Right? You might have the same family doctor

for decades in Winnipeg, but you might have a new doctor every year if you live up north. There's a constant flow of people coming in and out. And that's a challenge, that's a challenge that they have that we don't think about down here.

IT: You hit the nail on the head there, Jon. I was born in Winnipeg, moved out to Toronto, an even larger city, and I have kept those ties over decades. Whereas, you know, [for them] family doctors might come and go over the years. So, Jon, I want to kind of circle back because you talked about the supports and the growth of technology in this. And before this interview, in a kind of "pre-interview", just about this topic and what you needed to be able to do your job as a psychologist, and to perform your assessments, and to talk to children, and help with their wellbeing during this time. You were waiting on two iPads to help 67 children, which I think is just absolutely ridiculous, if not kind of absurd, just the amount of waiting for two things to help so much. Have those iPads arrived?

JB: They did arrive.

IT: Okay, okay. I can rest a little bit easier now.

JB: We had to make a bit of a roundabout workaround, but they arrived and now I can finally start my assessments again. It's going to be a new challenge, but thankfully we can start.

IT: Yeah, you have the infrastructure now and that's what counts. Jon, this has been a very insightful, and I think important, conversation about, some of the inequalities that northern, rural, Indigenous communities might be facing during this time. Do you have any final thoughts on this topic? On where these inequalities might go in that post-COVID-19 world after immunization?

JB: Yeah, I have a lot of hope. I have a lot of hope that we can learn from this. That it's not just a year and that we have to go back to the way it was before. It shouldn't be a blip, we need to learn and we need to grow from it. We need to realize that we need to have compassion for each other, for people who are in situations that we don't understand, people living in lifestyles that are completely different from us. We need to recognize that they're people too, and they have challenges that are different from ours, so we've got to have compassion for them. We also have to think about mental health much more than we ever did before. I know it's been slowly increasing [and people are] a little bit more aware of mental health, but it needs to be a bigger focus than we've ever had it as one.

But yeah, this shouldn't be "let's get back to the way it was before". I hear that a lot, but it's not, we need to grow from this. We need to realize, "hey, we can use this technology to help us in ways that we didn't use it before". Like maybe I should be doing more virtual meetings, more virtual assessments to save on travel time. Maybe people should be working from home more often. Maybe we need to take our health more seriously. These are things that I think we need to learn and I have hope that we, as a society, can

learn from this and can grow. And also, I hope that we recognize the value of education, because I worry that people see it as a glorified daycare, and I think we need to realize that it's much more than that. Development of children is so important and schools are so valuable for that.

IT: I think that's a that's a great way to kind of conclude this, Jon, in the sense of this notion of moving back to the way things were is not desirable anymore. It's about how can we improve as a society with this. Jon, thanks so much for your time. This has been a very insightful conversation.

JB: Thank you, Ian. Thanks for having me.