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THE FUTURE OF EDUCATION: FOURTH IN A FIVE-PART SERIES Technology: educational divider or equalizer?

TAMARA BALUJA AND KATE HAMMER

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"I don't know any vets in my city, so talking to my mentor is very helpful," Sadie says." We talk about everything – what courses I should take in high school to become a vet, how she became a vet, why she got interested in the career."

Sadie is part of a program called **DreamCatcher Mentoring**, which since 2005 has matched 700 students in Canada's North with mentors in the South in a bid to keep kids engaged with their studies.

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Is technology in the classroom the great divider or the great equalizer for kids from lower-income backgrounds?

Divider

Equalizer

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The program is considered a success. In Whitehorse, 41 per cent of high-school students won't graduate, but for kids involved in the program, only six per cent drop out.

And taking part doesn't require the latest in high technology, like smart boards or iPads. All that is needed is the ability to e-mail – with a simple computer and an Internet connection.

How much technology should be in the classroom is one of the most hotly debated issues in education.

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The latest gadgets can be out of reach for low-income families, but those in favour say it's the responsibility of schools to provide a digital education, which is necessary for an emerging work force. As teachers weigh the pros and cons of pricey hi-fi educational tools, the question becomes whether technology will be the divider or the equalizer for Canadian students.

Statistics Canada does not track children's access to technology at home, but there is anecdotal evidence and growing concern in education over a phenomenon known as the "app gap." It's based on studies, mostly out of the United

States, that found that low-income families are less likely to own a computer, download educational apps, and more likely to stick a television in their child's bedroom.

It's a "stumbling block to what's being described as the bring-your-own-device model of using digital tools in the classroom," says Matthew Johnson, educational director at the Media Awareness Network, a non-profit Canadian group advocating for digital literacy.

It's not just remote communities in the North who don't have access to technology. Mr. Johnson says similar trends exist in urban zones, in particular low-income neighbourhoods where infrastructure for high-speed Internet isn't an issue.

Valerie Steeves, a researcher at the University of Ottawa, has been running focus groups with teachers across the country on technology in the classroom for the Media Awareness Network.

"We asked our teachers if they assigned homework that would require their students to use technology, and many of them said 'absolutely not, it's an equity issue,' " she says. "They said that given the fact you can't just assume that all your students have the same amount of access, that it's important as teachers they take [that] into consideration when assigning work outside of the class."

But an innovative project in India suggests that it doesn't take many resources to bridge the digital divide.

The **Hole in the Wall** project has mounted computers in the walls of slums across the developing world. The experiment makes a compelling argument for an if-you-build-it-they-will-come approach to technology.

"It means simply that if you give the access to a [computer, children] will do the same thing ... They will pick up computing skills on their own, they will pick up English, improve in mathematics. They start Googling [and] using search engines," says Ritu Dangwal, a university professor involved with the project.

Recently, the project mounted a computer with programs on biotechnology in a remote, poor fishing village in southern India that had been affected by the 2005 tsunami.

None of the children spoke English, but when researchers came back to

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the village several months later, they had taught themselves complex subjects like how genes were passed on by heredity and were scoring 40 per cent in their understanding of English and biotechnology.

In Yukon, the Department of Education has embraced basic technology and brought Wi-Fi to every school and community centre as a means of closing the geographical and access gaps for its students. The government has also provided funding to DreamCatcher Mentoring and is looking at video conferencing to help improve access to education in remote communities.

"We believe that technology is going to be the thing that levels the playing field for our kids," says Christie Whitley, Yukon's assistant deputy minister of education. "The Internet gives them access to the world."

For Sadie, just e-mailing with her mentor is helping. "[DCM] and my mentor have given me an insight I don't think I would have otherwise," she says.

Josh Silvertown, the founder of DreamCatcher Mentoring, believes some technology can be the answer to the territory's educational challenges, like the high drop-out rate.

"If you can't have that face time, at least you are still getting some contact through e-mail. It's definitely opening up access for these kids," Mr. Silvertown says.

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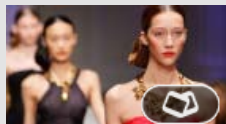
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