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Commentary

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Reimagining Our Futures: Education and the Promise of Possibility

Abstract

The COVID-19 pandemic resulted in the largest global disruption of schooling in recent history, resulting in immediate and cumulative ruptures. This commentary proposes a collective, conscious, and critical re-examination of education and education systems with a view to harnessing the promise of possibility. This exercise rests on questioning which and whose knowledges have been legitimised and valued, what has been counted as evidence, and what has been discounted or marginalised. The onus of conducting a critical re-examination rests with individuals and institutions that have been privileged.

Keywords: Education disruption, marginalisation, education systems, knowledge systems, cognitive justice

Introduction

The school and the family—the two most important institutions in the lives of children and young people—were gravely altered due to the consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic. At its height in April 2020, extended school closures affected nearly 90 per cent of learners globally (UNESCO, 2020), representing approximately one-fifth of humanity; 463 million children did not have access to any remote learning (UNICEF, 2020). Our estimates for the 2022 G20 Summit processes which were based on official data from UNESCO found that regionally, Central and South Asia had a combined 53 weeks of localised and partial closures between February 2020 and March 2022, and that India had the longest school closures regionally and globally at 93 weeks (Srivastava et al., 2022). Studies on learning loss show unequal effects of disruption, where children from poorer and marginalised groups suffered relatively greater losses. Aside from direct education-related effects, there were aggravated effects on the life circumstances of children. One study found that between January 2021 to

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May 2022, more than 10.5 million children experienced the death of a parent or grandparent as a primary or secondary caregiver (Hillis et al., 2022). This is a multigenerational loss.

The COVID-19 pandemic had individual- and institutional-level effects, which were compounded and cumulative. It is for these reasons that United Nations Secretary General, António Guterres, had termed the extended education disruption of the scale caused by the pandemic as a generational catastrophe—and put the onus on all of us, i.e., researchers, governments, donors, and civil society—to act, and to act with urgency (UN News, 2020).

This context further underscores the role of schools as nurturing, holistic places of care and learning that are fundamental to our lives, to our development as human beings, and to the development and collective futures of societies. While there may be an instinct to revert to technocratic solutions to "fix" education and to focus on the bedrock of formal education as "the 3 Rs—reading, writing, and arithmetic", in fact, education touches every aspect of our lives, individually, and collectively. We must remember that education exists within a deeply political sphere. It is central to the "who-ness", the very essence, of our society. It is from this broader vision of education that we must cleave a change—to move from seeming impossibilities in the face of crisis to reimagining possibilities for new collective futures.

At the institutional level, the COVID-19 pandemic laid bare the extent to which most education systems were unprepared for crisis. The myth of the proffered systems of "the West" or high-income OECD countries[1] as being "educationally secure" was shattered. I argue that countries with longer histories of dealing with emergencies and exclusion would have had much to share if their knowledges were similarly privileged. Thus, the model for knowledge and policy exchange, so oft characterised by "North-to-South transfers" must change. Not doing so in this time of rebuilding and reimagination will perpetuate a disconnect from rich sources of knowledge, resources, and expertise. From an agnotologic view, which can be described in plain terms as a willful ignorance for politically expedient ends, such disconnects provide institutionalised buffers for powerful actors to act in isolation or to not act with relative ease.

[1] OECD stands for Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development. See: https://www.oecd.org/en/about.html

Regardless, the inalienable right to education remains. It is not suspended in times of crisis or conflict. It continues for recovery. States are the principal duty-bearers under international human rights laws to respect, protect, and fulfill the right to education (UN ECOSOC, 1999; UNESCO, n.d.). The COVID-19 pandemic-led crisis highlights the centrality of these obligations.

From a technical view, the ability of countries to enact their obligations may be affected by capacity, supply, and financing issues that characterise education systems, new pandemic-related compulsions, and the level of crisis preparedness that systems have in place. From a more political view, pre-existing institutional inequities are crucial. I argue that short-term economic incentives and crude efficiencies have generally driven education policy responses. There is a severe and uncritical over-reliance on what I have referred to earlier as the mobilising frame of "scarce resources" (Srivastava, 2010), and an unwillingness of domestic governments and international donors to invest in education with sustained interest. In some contexts, this is somewhat more legitimate, for example, in countries classified as "least developed countries" and in countries which have a severe external debt-financing burden. In others, such a discourse is simply used as justification for continued inaction.

With regards to education recovery, I argue elsewhere that we cannot assess education policy responses without first considering the underlying assumptions that framed the education emergency caused by the COVID-19 pandemic (Srivastava, 2022). This is because our guiding assumptions are critical, not only in framing and legitimising certain knowledges, but also in framing how systems develop and how they are governed.

Education systems are the formal institutionalisation of which knowledges and values our societies privilege, who they privilege, how, and on what terms. They are imbued with assumptions. These assumptions inform how systems are structured. They also frame collective and individual interactions within systems, and how individuals and groups of individuals are inserted therein.

At every point, assumptions guide our decisions—they shape our systems. Assumptions frame not only what we think is worthy, but also who we think is worthy to be fully inserted into those systems. They frame who will have a hand in shaping our systems and who will be excluded from doing so. When woven together, these assumptions form the meta-narratives

that characterise the form and function of our education systems—and, in the case of the COVID-19 pandemic, the longer road to recovery. Collectively, assumptions structure complex social phenomena which characterise and make understandable our daily lived experiences, and systems govern how we gain access to fundamental institutional resources—in this case, education.

The legitimacy of education systems is accepted by propagating a dominant discourse that rests on seemingly neutral assumptions. However, assumptions can be dangerous because they may be incomplete, uncritical, colonial, and can mute certain voices. But if they are inclusive and consciously critical, as in classical Freirean analysis, assumptions can provide a reorienting framework—the capacity to reimagine education and its role in society and recovery.

I propose two ways to move forward collectively. But they require tenacity and a long-term view of change. While there are no prescriptive measures, perhaps one of the most fundamental exercises is to engage in a conscious and critical re-examination of which and whose knowledges have been legitimised and valued, what has been counted as evidence, and what has been discounted. The onus of conducting a critical re-examination rests with individuals and institutions that have been privileged, and starts at the most basic level by asking questions such as: whose perspectives have been privileged? Which types of methodologies and methods have been legitimised? Where are the dominant centres of knowledge production? Which research has gained influence? Which research has been mobilised into policy?

Next, we must begin a concerted effort at coalescing excluded knowledges and perspectives and integrating broader methodologies. This will necessitate a rapprochement of academic, policy-oriented, and grassroots researchers, stakeholders, and communities from the Majority World and from colonised areas globally. We may aim to forge partnerships that are less focused on large-scale, decontextualised, and superficial comparisons and metrics, and more on collaborative and open learning and knowledge-making to address the specifics of how education disruption has affected local contexts, communities, and individuals.

Knowledge-making and research from such a perspective would aim to explicitly tackle the institutional inequities that produce “hard-core” exclusion (Kabeer, 2000), that is, the

mutually reinforcing nature of multiple and durable inequities, with a view to radically altering the status quo. This is critical, given the hyper-localisation of education provision during the COVID-19 pandemic where the locus of formal education delivery shifted to the level of individual households, moving the family to the very core of provision. In many instances, this was accompanied by the hasty insertion of "big" EdTech, resulting in new and cumulative marginalisations within and across societies.

My hope is that through collective and consciously critical questioning, we may move away from systems that produce and reproduce hard-core exclusion towards what I call, "synergistic empowerment"—that is, the ability to unlock potential from mutually reinforcing attributes for all. From this perspective, the way forward rests on the capacity to reimagine education and its role in society and recovery. We cannot achieve this without explicating the underlying assumptions of our education systems as they were and as they currently are. We must further engage with the severe implications of privileging certain knowledges, individuals, and groups in the institutions that shape our formal education systems.

Thus, this proposal has an aspirational goal to seize a new moment for education to enact radical change and move towards the promise of possibility.

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