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Schools, Education and the Pandemic of 2020 - Introduction to a Special Issue of IDE Journal

The Covid-19 Pandemic of 2020 has and continues to have a world-wide impact on all sectors of society, most notably on health-care institutions, schools at all levels, and the economic sector. The Covid-19 virus, which appears to have surfaced in China sometime in the fall of 2019, spread quickly bringing illness to millions and death to hundreds of thousands of people. Although numerous vaccines are in trial stages at this point, it is not clear when they will be ready for mass distribution and beyond that, whether or to what extent they will be effective.

Over the past few decades, a number of wide spread infectious/contagious diseases have appeared on the world scene, including swine flu, bird flu, and SARS; however, nothing of this magnitude has occurred for more than a century when the influenza pandemic of 1918/19 killed more than five million people across the globe.

Response to the current pandemic has been uncertain, uneven, and slower than one might have hoped. At this point, those most effected are the elderly and those with underlying conditions ranging from obesity to compromised immune systems. The effects on health care institutions and health care workers have been notably severe. Both short- and long-term consequences to the world-wide economy are evident and may well continue for some time to come. In this special thematic edition of *International Dialogues on Education: Past and Present*, we turn our attention to the effects of the pandemic on education in the form of schools at different levels from primary through higher education. The authors of the essays that follow are professionals and academics who are closely connected to institutions of education around the world.

Currently, we are on the “front end” of the pandemic. The future of education in the wake of the Covid-19 crisis is largely unknown and unknowable, except for the high probability that education cannot return to a situation which all of us called “normal” and generally took for granted. Each of the authors participated in a virtual symposium on this same topic, sponsored by Seattle Pacific University, in July 2020. These essays represent their personal reflections, the results of their ongoing research, and the outcomes of the splendid conversations and exchange of ideas that occurred at the symposium.

Jeremy Delamarter argues that, contrary to the claims of neoliberal reformers, education is at its best when it is physically located and bounded by relationships both interpersonal and ecological. His thesis for place-based education is based on the opinion that “our educational salvation lies not in mechanization [technologies] but rather in humanization.”

Marianna Richardson suggests that in our rush to develop new learning modes because of the current crisis, we bear in mind the fact that technology in itself neither improves nor impedes learning. She notes that present circumstances do indeed encourage distance learning, but that new modalities should be used strategically and relevantly, which means active socially mediated learning, a pressing challenge as we move forward.

Alexey Mikhailov and Maria Burlakova describe the issues a Russian provincial university has attempted to adjust during the Covid-19 pandemic. The authors describe the significant challenges as well

as the opportunities that faculty members and students continue to encounter during these times of uncertainty.

Fatima Chahin-Dörflinger notes the need for evidence-based decision making to proven quality development, especially in times of school closures and attempts to provide alternative ways to teach and learn. She cites an action research project by school personnel designed to assess and improve distance learning in sustainable ways.

Fabian Mußél and Maria Kondratjuk present the strengths and limitations of qualitative research and the interplay of quantitative and qualitative research methods as researchers attempted to capture the effects of the pandemic on teachers, students, and families.

Dietmar Waterkamp argues that what we are doing to keep learning going during the current pandemic is less an experiment and more a reaction. Given the rush to provide schooling for children and adolescents, he draws helpful distinctions among such terms as “distance teaching,” “online schools,” and “homework assignments.” He notes that both educationists and economists are concerned about the short-term and long-term effects of our situation, particularly with regard to disadvantaged populations. Finally, he reminds us that the “new normal” may well become normal.

Josephine Jellen and Heike Ohlbrecht have carried out some insightful research regarding the effects on families of the school closures and subsequent moves to distance teaching and learning. They note in particular the deleterious effects on low-income families, who were already struggling, to keep up with the demands and technological resources needed to support distance learning. Mothers are particularly carrying a heavy burden. But they also point to certain positive outcomes, citing the family as a renewed resource because of the changes.

Olga Graumann also investigated the effects of school closures on families and the inequalities that were exacerbated by the distance learning model. She describes the problems that were encountered, including lack of necessary equipment in homes, “immature and unproven concepts of distance learning” and the limitations of digital technologies and innovative teaching methods to solve for the deficits in these areas. In addition to discussing what all of this means for families, she also highlights the importance of what is missing: the analogue teacher-pupil relationship.

AnnRené Joseph raises the questions that inevitably arise concerning the future of arts education in times of a pandemic. How can a subject that relies so heavily on hands-on learning be taught through distance modes? She discusses a myriad of virtual and hybrid approaches to arts education while freely admitting the challenges and frustrations facing arts teachers and students.

Tomm Stewart and Hillamaria Seauve-Rantajääskö stress the crucial importance of how we think of “others” in these unprecedented times of epidemic proportions. At the center of their article are the themes of equity and equal opportunity in education. Thoughts of the “other” inevitably arise as we struggle to maintain and improve a stable and equitable society through the medium of education.

John B. Bond stresses the need for social-emotional learning (SEL) during these troubled times. He argues that the chaos, stress, and anxiety that students and teachers experience must be considered, but that in doing so, opportunities to contribute to improved academic growth are enhanced. He reminds us that true learning always involves emotions, and that the current conditions bring that issue to front and center.

Munyi Shea and Alexis Awdziejczyk propose a 3Rs approach to teaching and learning: **R**elational connectedness, **R**estored trust, and contextualized **R**esilience. They make a compelling case for healing, not mere performance, the goal for schools. They point out that the most compelling question for educators is “how to support their students during these overlapping crises.”

Jing Xiang and Ying Yan argue that now, in the midst of the current pandemic, is a perfect time for people to realize that we must treat the world as a community and that this community has an obligation to address and solve problems in the light of a shared future. They conclude that the sustainable development of human social goals depends on the sustainability of education, education that is comprehensive, equitable, and inclusive.

William Rowley, a retired university dean, takes a reflective view of education in times of crisis to point out that while higher education surely has a future, there can be no return to “business as usual.” He predicts that the future priority for administrators in higher education will be the search for financial viability. He suggests that what is needed is an entire re-assessment of every aspect of the enterprise.

Philipp Pohlenz informs the reader that the present time, that of the Covid-19 crisis, reveals the serious shortcomings of the purely market-oriented management of public services so prevalent today in higher education. He introduces certain management paradigms that seem more appropriate to modern, post-industrialist societies, especially focusing on a need for coordinated action and cooperation rather than market competition.

It is our hope that these essays will stimulate your thoughts, and we sincerely invite your commentary. In fact, we hope to hear from readers all over the world who have experienced the current pandemic and who have hopes and ideas for the improvement of education.

Keeping in mind that the current crisis, terrible as it is, can also act as a stimulus to new insight and action, we welcome your ideas.

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