
Guest editorial: educational legacies of the pandemic

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What will be the educational legacies of this pandemic? Many years from now, when we survey the educational landscape, which features will say had their origins in these years of global upheaval? Legacies persist long after the current moment; though they are passed on to future generations, they need not be immediately apparent or intentional. Bloody world wars, the brutality of slavery, natural disasters, industrialization – these all have legacies that outlasted their dramatic events. There were certainly aftershocks that impacted the economy or politics, but lasting legacies reside in fundamental restructurings of societal relationships, shared goals and cultural values.

It is worth our effort, then, to plunge into the deep and discover what is brewing below. First, it is worth recognizing that the field of education itself represents legacies of both idealism and domination.

In the USA, for example, public education was grounded in ideals of personal independence and meritocracy. Free schools were envisioned as a way to mold the uncultured and backwards masses into the citizenry demanded by a robust democracy (Kaestle, 1983). But these hopes ran headlong into the demands of a rapidly industrializing economy and swelling urban centers, transforming schools into factory-like bureaucracies engineered for control and order (Ingersoll, 2003; Tyack, 1974). From the beginning, the national network of schools was starkly segregated, governed by byzantine and blatantly discriminatory policies. These have left an educational legacy of growing inequality and racist divisions in life outcomes (Ladson-Billings, 2006; Kozol, 2005; Valenzuela, 1999).

Around the world, under names like modernity, development, human rights and globalization, schooling has been a key front in the societal progress. “Education makes an essential contribution to building inclusive and democratic societies,” wrote Audrey Azoulay, the Director-General of UNESCO, reflecting education’s position as a universal human right. Countless studies have investigated the benefits of primary education on strengthening civil society, empowering women, and leading economic development (UNESCO, 2020a). This has galvanized both state and non-state actors to push for “Education for All,” (ibid.). But these efforts also carry the legacy of a world fixated on nation-building, on creating the rituals and myths that legitimate new regimes and signal participation on the global stage (Ramirez, 2012; Meyer and Rowan, 1977). At the same time, schools channel trends that favor standardization over diversity, privatization over community and individual wealth over the common good (Ball, 2012).

The observation that schooling looks remarkably similar around the world is evidence of a larger project of cultural imperialism, one where more and more we use the same discourse, view the same images, adopt the same consumption patterns, and become enmeshed in the same markets (Anderson-Levitt, 2003; Tomlinson, 1991). Against this backdrop of the complex history of modern education, it can be difficult to detect new undercurrents spawned by the pandemic.

I like this framing of the problem because it pushes beyond descriptions of school closures, mask-wearing or life on Zoom. The preoccupation with the burning immediacy of the shocking consequences of the pandemic is to be expected; after all, over a billion primary and secondary students saw in-person learning suspended (UNESCO, 2020a), as did millions of students at colleges and other learning institutions. Undoubtedly, there have been



stunning changes in how teachers teach and learners learn. But to speak of “legacy” is to sift through such directly visible changes. Just like legacies of war are difficult to see in the debris of a bombing, we must look deeper to find the lasting impact of the pandemic. This special issue is an attempt to begin that search for the deeper legacies of the pandemic in education.

New values in a located education

Almost immediately after the onset of the pandemic, many recognized that school closures would affect much more than “academic” learning. Officials worried about issues such as social isolation, domestic violence, food security, teacher burnout and childcare costs, among others (UNESCO, 2020b). The stories of suffering during the pandemic will no doubt continue to emerge, but there is also a strand of scholarship that shows how humans have responded to adversity with tenacity. For example, some students thrived academically during remote learning (Hammerstein *et al.*, 2021), and others have shown emotional resilience during school closures (Patston *et al.*, 2021; Luthar *et al.*, 2021). Narratives that foreground teacher voices have shown educators taking pride in “finding a way” for their students (Kim and Asbury, 2020).

The point is that the legacies of this pandemic are still unclear and at times paradoxical. While mountains of statistics show great “learning loss” (Engzell *et al.*, 2021; Hammerstein *et al.*, 2021), learning carries on in other forms. Even though much teaching has gone online, personal connections seem more important than ever. Perhaps, then, one legacy will be our ability to resist speaking about education in abstractions and instead show that this profession is always deeply human. We can find possibility in recognizing there is no such thing as “education,” but millions of *educations* each deeply located in communities and relationships (Delamarter, 2020).

That spirit is found in this special issue. One group of papers captures the immediate toll of COVID-19. Danielle Magaldi and Harriet Fayne write about how classrooms were thrown into disarray as the pandemic began. They follow two new teachers – and their professors – and describe how they sought to carry on meaningful education as their students faced sickness, isolation and economic hardship. Shoshana Cohen-Fraade and Maura Donahue used a survey in the immediate aftermath of COVID-19 to offer a snapshot of teacher mental health challenges. Their analysis reveals the psychological price of teaching but also spotlighted new ways our profession can support teachers. In their paper on private language institutes in Iran, Dara Tafazoli and Samira Atefi Boroujeni show how managers adopted an entirely new calculus to keep their centers operational. Throughout the world, such organizations are important quasi-public nodes of learning that fill the gaps of public education, but they have had to fight for survival during the pandemic. Together, this collection of papers shows educators grappling with incredible turmoil and demonstrating creativity, flexibility and determination.

A second group of papers look at rural education. Covering a wide geographic range, Kara Lassater and her co-authors give fascinating and varied accounts of being educators in rural America as schools closed. Through hearing the voices of school counselors, superintendents and teachers, we see the power of compassion in helping school communities persist even as they are separated. Mehwish Raza’s study shows the power of what now seems an antiquated technology: radio. Even prior to the pandemic girls in the remotest provinces of Pakistan had long been denied access to basic education, and in this study we see the impact of pre-recorded radio lessons. These two papers offer powerful examples of how children’s education is profoundly enmeshed in the values and structures of communities.

A last collection of papers offer challenges to the common terms of education. In my paper with my colleague Jill Ordynans, we show people discovering personal agency in their work by redefining the meaning of “teaching” even as the pandemic pushed so many aspects out of their control. Conor Mellon used in-depth interviews with teachers in Ireland to explore how identities can morph and be reconstructed through times of difficulty. While teacher burnout is a current hot topic, his study tunes in to teachers as they are finding a greater purpose in their work during remote learning. And lastly, Mike Rifino and Kushya Sugarman used Black Feminist perspectives to theorize new pedagogical approaches to foster belonging. Based in their work in community colleges, they identify student loneliness as a defining characteristic of adult education that is targeted at low-income students, and they show how new ways of thinking about instruction can build spaces of empowerment. In this last selection of studies there arises new possibilities about what it means to be a teacher, or a student, or even to “educate.”

There are no firm answers about the pandemic’s educational legacy; what one can find are portraits from around the world of educators confronting challenges and writing new narratives. A range of settings are represented: homes, schools, community colleges and private learning institutions. Four countries are represented. Several papers are based in New York City, one of the “epicenters” of COVID and a place where the pandemic shattered thousands of families (McKinley, 2020). Together, the eight papers here are a humble step toward offering new ways of looking at what education is today in the hope that we can see where it might go in the future.

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