



Imagining what education can be post-COVID-19

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Abstract This Viewpoint argues that the COVID-19 crisis offers a unique chance to imagine more equitable societies and education systems. It is also a call to action, to take meaningful action to bring about that desired future.

Keywords COVID-19 · Future of education · Inequality

Indian novelist/activist Arundhati Roy (2020) has described the current COVID-19 pandemic as a portal. It is a pathway that leads to a reconfigured future, one that must be different from the world we previously knew. The pandemic's disproportionate, tragic consequences for health and livelihoods—for individuals, their communities, and even whole societies—underscore institutionalized forms of discrimination rooted in race, ethnicity, class, gender, sexual orientation, age, and abilities.

These inequities are patently manifest in education systems around the world. The individuals most marginalized and discriminated against have suffered the greatest from the closure of schools and the efforts to reach students with online instruction. Delivery of education this way illustrates the difficulties posed for students who lack computers or who live in remote areas without electricity or Wi-Fi. These students might not even have space at home where they can work uninterrupted. Furthermore, fundamental services provided by schools have been significantly reduced or unavailable.

We cannot go back to this unsatisfactory status quo. COVID-19's lessons compel us to imagine education systems in which students of all ages can thrive. We know that in many communities, schools are basic resource centers, often providing students with their only nutritious meal of the day. More than that, where equipped with a range of basic amenities,

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schools provide running water for showers and laundering. In metropolitan centers as well as in better-endowed rural communities, nurses and other health personnel may be available to attend to basic medical needs. Traumatized students and their parents may have access to counselors and social workers (Ewing and Johnson 2020).

Early in my career, I highlighted the importance of imagining community learning centers. In UNICEF's *Assignment Children*, I argued that there had been an absence of bold, innovative, and integrated approaches to the education problems of the urban and rural poor in developing countries (Arnove 1973, p. 94). The learning centers I proposed would provide institutional contexts serving multiple needs in these populations with a range of programs and resources. I envisioned these centers as being meeting places where individuals of any age could go to take short courses, receive counseling, share interests, teach skills, receive health and nutritional care, and gain access to information on national social services. I noted that the centers could utilize existing community facilities—houses of worship, recreational centers, health services, community action centers, and, of course, existing schools (Arnove 1973, p. 98).

Obviously, such centers are still relevant today, even in the wealthiest country in history. Compared with other economically prosperous countries, the United States fares poorly on various international standardized measures of academic achievement. The most basic reason: the US has the highest rate of poverty among school-age children in industrial capitalist states. School systems with critically reimagined curricula have a role to play in addressing these inequities at all levels, from the local to the global. They can equip students to live in more just and democratic societies, as well as in a more interdependent world.

Above all, we must not return to what philosopher and pedagogue Freire (1970) called the “banking model of education”: education in which measured amounts of knowledge are “deposited” in students. The current international high-stakes testing mania perfectly illustrates the problem. It is easy to find, even among very liberal media, concerns about how losing two months of in-person education will impact how much students learn—how disadvantaged students will lose not only what might be learned in the current year, but in subsequent years, falling endlessly behind. But this view of a curriculum, one with serious consequences for schools, teachers, and students who do not perform well on standardized summative evaluations, implies that there is some divinely ordained amount of knowledge that must be learned in a specified amount of time. Instead of concentrating on the quantity of knowledge imparted, I would rather focus on what is learned and how it is learned.

Now is the perfect time to have students engage with a problem-posing curriculum. Instructional content would involve students critically examining the issues that impinge on them personally, as well as on their families and communities. Recently, for example, sociologist of education and University of Chicago professor Eve Ewing, along with Chicago Teachers Union (CTU) activist Jen Johnson, illustrated how students could compare the incidents of coronavirus illnesses and deaths in their neighborhoods with those of other neighborhoods with, for example, a different socioeconomic status (Ewing and Johnson 2020). This exercise could reasonably be completed by students as young as ten years of age.

Along similar lines, while it is likely that most countries will blend online and in-person schooling for the foreseeable future, we can use online instruction to connect students within and across countries to learn about shared interests. These interests are likely to concern existential challenges to individual and familial well-being: housing and food security, the quality of the water they drink and the air they breathe, and dramatic changes in the environment that threaten their communities. Such a curriculum would require a decisive

move away from high-stakes testing to more formative evaluations. These would involve, as is well-known, student portfolios providing evidence of projects, encounters, and various actions. Such actions may have beneficial outcomes, not only for the students themselves but also for those near and dear to them, reaching an expanding set of communities.

In my various writings I have advocated for education systems that have a necessary degree of autonomy, one countering political indoctrination and a conveyor belt for prescribed, dehumanizing roles in inequitable, segmented, and stratified economies. I have also been an active critic of efforts to dismantle and privatize public education systems: public education systems are the primary institution central to the formation of critical, participatory citizens in a democracy. At their best, public schools teach students to work with individuals from different backgrounds. Here they learn a sense of social solidarity, not only with members of their own society but also with communities across the world. Besides teaching analytical reasoning, high levels of literacy, and numeracy, schools also can and should be teaching ethical commitments and enhancing aesthetic sensibilities—developing a commitment to social justice and a love of beauty. Schools, furthermore, can teach respect for human differences and opposing points of view (Arnové 1994, p. 211).

Beyond K–12 schools, there are challenges for imagining some new roles for higher education systems. In *Community Learning Centers* (Arnové 1973, p. 190), I noted:

In developing countries, universities have the potential to play a leading role in designing alternative forms of schools and new education systems. Universities have the resources to prepare learning materials (e.g., instructional packages, science kits, new curricula) for community-based education, train a variety of professional and paraprofessional teaching and service personnel, and help establish and evaluate pilot programs which would demonstrate to national governments the feasibility of new approaches to acute educational problems.

Although these recommendations were based on what I observed in the extension programs of several Colombian universities, they are not limited to developing countries. I recommended how universities could change the roles they play. Instead of projecting their own values and conceptions of what was needed by their surrounding communities, they needed to see how their resources and talents matched up with community-perceived education and social development problems. Doing so would indicate priority areas and types of activities in which the two could work together as co-equals (Arnové 1973, p. 102).

With regard to higher education, I also would like to address issues related to disruptions in the international flow of students. Many students have found themselves in dire situations: stranded at home without adequate resources or, with the eventual resumption of classes, without the means to return to their universities. While several major countries have depended on international students to finance their higher education systems, they have done so in the most crass, instrumental terms. Rarely have universities and colleges viewed international students as resources for reframing their curricula to include more global perspectives. Neither have institutions, for the most part, adequately encouraged and supported the efforts of their faculty with international experience to incorporate new approaches to what and how they teach. Instead, internationalizing efforts have often been confined to seeking new foreign markets, overseas campuses, and partnerships with elite universities in geopolitically strategic countries.

Instead, I call for a higher education ethos that views internationalizing efforts as fundamental to a transformative, humanizing education. It is an education that develops an empathic capacity in individuals to view the world from the perspectives of people situated in radically different circumstances. It involves the capacity to see differences, then

to respect and to celebrate them. Such an education also enables all involved to understand their common humanity (Arnove 2013, pp. 9–10).

This is what the COVID-19 pandemic has made powerfully and painfully clear to us. We are now going through a pathway to what I hope the readers of *Prospects* will consider a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity—a chance to imagine more equitable societies and education systems, and, to the extent possible, take meaningful action to bring about that desired future.

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