



Covid 19: Opportunity to Re-Imagine Education Globally Responding to the Call for Innovation, Creativity and Change

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The thesis of this article is that education has come to be seen by humanity as the solution to every societal problem and challenge since the middle of the twentieth century. Education systems are also notorious for remaining stuck in archaic patterns that may not keep up with the demands of the current age. Historically, societal disruptions have presented opportunities for fundamental change. This article argues that the global societal disruption brought about by the Corona (Covid-19) pandemic should be utilised to re-imagine and redesign education. While the primary change should involve organising education institution systems and institutions to allow for creativity, in order to replace the historical motive of submissiveness and the conformity. The exigencies of the twenty-first century require a host of other changes as well. Changes should be affected on all aspects of education, such as access, enrolments, equality globally and indeed the pandemic has starkly signalled the strong need for such changes.

Key words: *Access to education; Covid-19 pandemic; Creativity; Education; Equal education opportunities; Fourth Industrial Revolution; Social Media; Twenty-first century.*

Introduction

For centuries education was considered an inessential luxury in public life, even viewed negatively as a drain on society's resources. Since the mid-twentieth century education has assumed the role of panacea for most problems facing humanity. In the early twenty-first century, this widely perceived role of education has further gained prominence. Moreover, the exigencies of the early twenty-first century demand a new kind of educational system. By



contrast, the education systems of the world are characterised by inertia, either resistant to, or slow to change, thus becoming increasingly outdated. This paper argues that the education systems of the world fail to meet the demands of the contemporary, evolving world, and that disruption and challenge brought by the Covid-19 pandemic, presents an opportunity to re-think and to re-make global education systems.

The article commences by highlighting the historical evolution of education and its place in society. The forms of education relevant to the twenty first century is then discussed and contrasted with the current state of education in the world. The opportunity for the reconstruction of education resulting from a major societal disruption, such as Covid -19 is then explained.

Education as panacea for problems facing humanity

The first schools in history were established in Mesopotamia around 3000 BC. Thus far, few scholars have attempted to reconstruct the beginnings of schooling, much less explained their origins. Yehudi Cohen (1970) believed that education served a political purpose. The early schools served to train an elite tasked with the administration of what he (Cohen) calls “civilisation states”, i.e. relatively large political units. While Cohen has a political rationale, Peter Gray (2013) puts forth an economic explanation, namely that after the agricultural revolution, the new economy required a worker different from the free-roaming, independent, autonomous person typical of a hunter-gatherer economy. As an agricultural economy requires a disciplined and submissive person, schools were invented to cultivate such a person.

Whatever the driving force behind the establishment of schools was—both Cohen and Gray may be valid — for a very long time in history, up until recently, schooling was relatively uncommon in the world. For the aggregate global adult population, the literacy rate in 1900 stood at a paltry 20 percent (Mortimer, 2014: 268).

Not only were formal educational institutions attended by only a minuscule fraction of the total population, education stood at the fringe of society and public life, including intellectual life. For example in the seventeenth century, momentous changes occurred without any sign of the university as the vanguard of intellectual-scientific life. The political thinkers who laid the intellectual basis for the Glorious Revolution in England, the French Revolution, the American Declaration of Independence and the Creed of Human Rights, such as John Locke, Thomas Jefferson, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, Montesquie and Voltaire, had no university education. The same can be said of the inventors of the steam engine (which laid the technological basis of the industrial revolution) — James Watt and Thomas Newcomen, and even of Robert Boyle, with his contribution to the development of chemistry as a scientific discipline. According to Adam Smith, a free market economic theorist, who in the eighteenth century formulated the economic



creed of free market economics, education was no positive factor. His only scant reference to education was a remark depicting it as a negative factor in economic growth.

The development or expansion of formal education surged in the early decades of the nineteenth century in Western Europe, when national public systems of (often compulsory) primary education were created. This occurred concurrently with the development of nation states as a political power factor in Western Europe. It is difficult to counter the argument that the objective of these systems of education was to create a loyalty towards the new nation state and to suppress other local loyalties (towards a province, region, clan, class, ethnic group, etc), similar to Cohen's (1970) explanation for the introduction of schools in the ancient world — in fact Cohen (1970) draws the parallel between the role of schools in securing the political integrity in the “civilisation” states of the ancient world, and among nation states which developed from the early nineteenth century in Western Europe, later followed by other parts of the world. Max Weber, Emile Durkheim and John Stuart Mill, all identified the rise of national education systems as being as part of the apparatus of modern government on the Western world (Mundy, Green, Lingard & Verger, 2026). Regardless of unspoken political objectives, both the scholarly and the public discourse on education did not relate schooling to any particular societal goal.

However, an unexpected revolution occurred in the decades after the Second World War, from the 1960s in particular. While the antecedents and causes of this change are manifold, the establishment of the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO), and the rise of Human Capital Theory and Modernisation Theory can surely be singled out as very significant in this regard. Education came to be seen as the most powerful means to effect an unlimited range of desired changes, such as the modernization of the nations of the developing world, the eradication of unemployment, effecting economic growth, bring about social mobility, curbing unchecked population growth, stamping out drug abuse, reducing traffic accidents, establishing international peace, entrenching democracy, establishing a culture of respect for human rights, to mention but a few.

A wide range of empirical studies support these claims that education has become a powerful tool in society. These include Harbison & Myers (1964) who referred to a 75 country study calculating a correlation between level of education development and level of economic development. There are also lesser well known studies, demonstrating for example, that in Malawi, a positive correlation between people's health and the education level of their nearest neighbours, or research in Indonesia, Cuba and Haiti finding that education is a strong predictor of people's chances of surviving a hurricane or a tsunami (Lutz & Klingholz . 2017).

How impressive these studies are, the invaried positive correlations between education and individual and societal returns on an aggregate level are not found on lower levels, and are most pronounced at the level of the individual. For example, despite the inverse relationship



between the level of education and unemployment rates found in all national contexts, the extent differs widely between particular national contexts, occupational categories, and between different social, age and gender groups. At the level of the individual, the growing spectre of schooled unemployment may show complex pattern. Education-societal relations vary from level to level, and depend on the total societal contextual ecology in which an education system or institution finds itself. The role of scholarship in the fields of Comparative and International Education is to explain these education-societal interrelationships.

The dynamic new society of the twenty-first century

Furthermore the societal context does not vary over space only, but over time too; and the twenty-first century is characterized by a number of seismic changes, that require a new kind of education. This section will briefly summarise the societal changes currently taking place worldwide, which will be followed by a discussion of educational changes. The next section the imperatives that these changes direct to education.

Humanity is currently facing an ecological crisis threatening the survival of our species, and the planet. The earth is facing a population explosion, albeit the global population growth rate peaked at 2.1 percent in 1968 and has been decreasing since then. The global population is predicted to stabilise by the year 2100, and then at 11 billion. The global population is also a more mobile population — both in terms of short term (daily) movements, and more permanent movements, including migration at intra-national and international scale. Another conspicuous feature of the twenty-first century is the continuing development of science and technology. This includes the looming development of artificial intelligence, genetic modification and the information, communication and transport technology revolution, placing knowledge (and everything claimed to be knowledge) within the access of everybody.

Economic trends include rising levels of affluence, which has been noted over millennia, centuries and decades (see Mortimer, 2014). Three other salient economic trends are the neo-liberal economic revolution, the rise of knowledge economies and the fourth industrial revolution. The neo-liberal economic revolution, that is the contraction of the role of the state in the economy (and in areas such as health services, transportation services and education), commenced around 1990. A knowledge economy is an economy where the production and consumption of new knowledge has become the driving axis of the economy. The nascent fourth industrial revolution refers to the merging of the physical, biological and the digital worlds (a prime example is the prospect of artificial intelligence). Other economic trends are growing inequality, despite growing aggregate levels of affluence, diminishing but still widespread poverty, and — especially in the Global South — the rise of the informal economic sector. Economic internationalism is also visibly on the rise.



Social trends include the reducing importance and salience of the primary and secondary social groups in society. These are the family and the work place, respectively on the other hand, the importance of tertiary social groupings, such as voluntary, functional groupings (sport and hobby clubs or common interest societies) are rising. Another social trend is the rise of multiculturalism replacing the more homogenous societies of the past.

Politically, one trend is the dwindling power and stature of the once omnipotent nation state. This has left a vacuum that is being filled by supra-national and international structures and organisations and sub-national and local structures. A second trend is that of democratization, which came to the fore concomitant with the neo-liberal economic revolution in a wave commencing in 1990. Decentralisation and democratization have in turn strengthened a trend towards individualization.

Finally turning to religion and philosophy, religion continues to be a strong force in the private life of the majority of people as well as in public life all over the world, although it is taking on a new and more complex form. Many people who regard themselves as being religious no longer belong to any organized religious community. There is a rise of spirituality and people can be placed on a long continuum between religiousity and spirituality; some regard themselves as spiritual but not religious, some as religious but not spiritual and some as both. People are less likely to subscribe to the dogma of any particular religious denomination or grouping, instead putting together their own set of beliefs. Related to this is the rise of interculturalism as a concept (superseding multiculturalism). The Creed of Human Rights is becoming the common moral code for humanity. A trend all over the world — despite increasing diversity and tolerance — is the rise of materialism, individualism and consumerism (sometimes described as the Western outlook or hierarchy of values).

The contrasting inertia of and lack of performance by education systems

Unlike society, education systems are notoriously characterized by strong inertia, being either slow changing, or resistant to change. This problematic feature of education systems and institutions was perhaps best depicted in Harold R.W. Benjamin's 1939 satirical book *The Saber Tooth Curriculum* (Benjamin, 1939), which has since attained classical status in education. In this section the imperatives which modern society directs at education is contrasted with the existing, historically evolved states of education systems, under the rubrics of Education objectives are discussed, including the need to shift the emphasis in education from teaching to learning, improve teaching and learning methods, learning objectives, using technology to supporting education, and the need to view education as lifelong rather than a one-off event.

With regards to objectives of education, according to Biesta (2013: 4) scholarly and non-scholarly responses to the question of “why do we want an education system/institution”



revolve around three points: to learn useful skills, to socialize (and adapt to society) and to individualise, that is to give the educand maximum choices and opportunities for self-actualisation. Changing society can be a further objective. While the exact (stated as well as realized) objectives in any education system rarely — if ever — comprise exclusively of any single one of these, the relative emphasis varies by time and place. But what can be stated, is that both Cohen and Gray's theories (explained above) as to the creation of formal education systems offers a strong socialization rationale, to the point of submissiveness, subduing the individual, and that education systems today still strongly bear this stamp. However, the current age requires more opportunity for individuality, independence and creativity, and for the individual to develop their own points of view and beliefs and taking an active role in ensuring that they agree with societal changes.

The twenty-first century society would benefit from an emphasis on learning rather than teaching in education institutions. Historically, education institutions have been very teacher centred, with the teacher as the undisputed master of content (and much more) transmitting this content to students. That may well be appropriate for days before the invention of printing, but today, when the web has democratized access to information and knowledge, and in an age of democratization and a premium which values creativity and diversity, teacher centred education seems outdated. Despite being highly prized, however, education systems worldwide are stuck in teacher practices of education they find difficult to escape from (see Schweisfurth, 2011). This includes highly rated education systems such as that of Finland (see Andrews, 2013), and the university sector, as a study on the university sector in Eswatini (Swaziland) has reported (see World Bank, 2011: 90).

Related to this challenge of moving from teacher to student centred education are the following three problems. Teaching methods, such as the traditional lesson or lecture seem redundant. The word "lecture" comes from the Latin word "lektio" meaning "I read". In medieval times the lecture involved the professor reading the textbook word after word and the students writing it down verbatim, as this was the most economic way to copy books and to spread knowledge. The invention of printing in the fifteenth century rendered this method redundant, and more so in the context of the twenty-first century. Secondly the learning method of rote memorization is equally unnecessary when information is ubiquitously available with the press of a button on a smart phone, and when learning methods based on constructivist learning theory or intersubjectivity seem to be more appropriate. Thirdly, in terms of Bloom's taxonomy of education objectives, in any case, with information freely and abundantly available, education should focus less on inculcating knowledge and instead aim to analyse, synthesise and above all (in times of social media and fake news) to evaluate, and creatively process information and construct knowledge (in a knowledge economy with more individualization in society).

Furthermore, with rising longevity and a rapid change (progress in technology or increase in knowledge), lifelong learning should be emphasised. While an experiment such as the Open



Loop University at Stanford University, United States of America (Stanford 2025, 2020) is noteworthy in this regard, universities and higher education systems worldwide remain premised on the model of higher education being a once-off event commenced during late adolescence, which appears to be out of tune with current societal needs.

Education systems worldwide continue to fall short of expectations on many counts. Education systems can be evaluated on three aspects: the quantitative (referring to access and enrolments), the qualitative (education quality) and the equality aspect (see Wolhuter, 2014). On the quantitative aspect, for example, a global study found that 258 children of school going age, 17 percent of the total, were not attending school (UNESCO, 2020b: 6). Quality of education does not meet desired levels as per many indicators. For example, in Sub-Saharan Africa only 41 percent of teachers in upper secondary schools are trained (UNESCO, 2020b: 302). Education remains highly unequal according to socio-economic descent, gender, ethnic or racial status, and geography. For example, in low- and middle-income countries, adolescents from the richest 20% of all households were three times more likely to complete lower secondary school than those from the poorest homes (UNESCO, 2020: 2).

The Covid-19 disruption

In the beginning of the year 2020, the world was caught off-guard by the unexpected outbreak of the Corona Virus pandemic. The disruptions brought on by Covid-19 included global challenges for education systems to promote continue meaningful learning. The pandemic saw multiple announcements of the suspension of school, college and university attendance in all parts of the world. Statistically, this has affected about 91 percent of the global student population (UNESCO, 2020a, 2020c). Universities worldwide quickly went into distance or on-line education or blended university modes, via various learning management systems (LMS). This change spurred a rethinking of what constitutes a university, particularly in a high-technology age. Scholars of education had to consider the complex academic, economic, and societal effects of such a change of tuition mode, as well as how the pandemic may affect the work of administrators, managers, faculty and students at higher education institutions. The pandemic has also affected the work of school teachers, and the role of parents in the education of their children. The pandemic exposed stark inequalities in education systems worldwide, and increased the potential value of modern technology in supplying education.

Covid-19 necessitated urgent contingency plans to resume education back to all, but above all, has made us rethink what we know, how we come to know, and how we should proceed from here onwards. On a global scale, theorising on solutions to problems were severely disrupted, across disciplines paradigms of thinking were challenged and institutions of power trembled. This is perhaps now the opportune moment for “deliberative conversations in the academic assemblage” about ethics and social justice in research (Maistry (2020: 96) and the post-Covid-19 knowledge systems. This is not only an opportunity to rethink teaching and learning, the



organisation, structure and functioning of education institutions, as well as to reflect on the objectives of education, and on its interrelationship with society.

Societal disruptions as turning points in history

Societal disruptions have been turning points in history, catalysing and precipitating change, including positive, wholesome changes. Barnett (1953: 1) for example, draws attention to the fact that shortly after the First World War, aviation technology rapidly developed due to the exigencies of the war. In study of world history dating back centuries, Diamond (1997) depicts the spread of Western hegemony as the outcome of technological prowess and germs. The crises caused by contact between Westerners and non-Western peoples, (given the asymmetry in technological possession and resistance to germs), shaped the course of history for five hundred years.

Changes due to societal disruptions can be positive or disastrous. Maylam (2020) for example, draws attention to the effect of the Great Depression of the 1930s. While it resulted in Roosevelt's New Deal in the United States, and to visible infrastructure improvement and more social responsibility in governance, it also pushed some countries in Europe towards fascism. Secondly, Diamond (2019) explains that the pivotal issue is how a crisis is navigated, which changes are made that determines whether the outcome is positive or negative. That the outcome can be beneficial if well planned. Diamond (2019) illustrates by referring to the history of seven nations: Finland, Australia, Chile, Indonesia, Japan, Germany and the United States. In the case of Australia, three major events in 1972, rapidly brought about changes which there had been pressure to implement for a considerable time.

Societal disruptions as turning points in education history or development

There are many examples in history as to how a societal disruption led to educational changes, including beneficial changes with far reaching consequences. The Fall of Constantinople in 1453, and the end of the Orthodox or Eastern Roman Empire (Byzantine Empire) saw the closing of the university in Rome, with students schooled in the Greek-Roman classics fleeing the city into Christian Europe. Their subsequent teaching of the Greek-Roman classical literature to students in Europe was one of the factors leading to the Renaissance, taking Europe out of the Middle Ages. The unexpected defeat of Prussia at the hands of Napoleon's forces at the battle of Jena in 1806 resulted in the Prussian king establishing the Humboldt University in Berlin in 1810, where university rector Wilhelm van Humboldt began an entirely new type of university (with research, freedom of learning and teaching as key features), which soon became the model for universities in every region of the world. In the United States, post World War 2, the introduction of the Servicemen's Readjustment Act of 1944, commonly known as the G.I. Bill, gave a range of benefits to demobilized soldiers of the war. This included covering tuition fees and living expenses for those wishing to attend university. Some



two million ex-servicemen benefited from this opportunity. This was one of the factors which enabled the transition of the higher education system in the USA from an elite to a mass system, which eventually followed in many other parts of the world.

In the scholarly field of comparative and international education, University of London comparativist Robert Cowen (1996) has argued for the study of transitiologies to be given more attention. While Cowen focuses on socio-political construction, this article argues for the parameters of study to be broadened to include all kinds of major societal disruptions, and for these to become the focus of scholarly attention, which has not occurred thus far.

Conclusion

In recent history, education has come to be seen as the wonder solution to every societal ill and challenge. Yet one of the features of education is to be tenaciously stuck in obsolete patterns. Societal disruptions have proved historically to present opportunities for fundamental change. The present global outbreak of the Covid 19 pandemic affords an opportunity for a sorely needed re-designing of education. While the core change of this innovation should be organising education systems and institutions to allow for creativity, and replace the historical value of submissiveness and conformity, the exigencies of the twenty-first century requires a host of other changes as well. At the same time changes should be processed on all three of the quantitative (access, enrolments), quality, and equality dimensions of the global education project — indeed the pandemic has starkly displayed the strong need for such changes too.

Biography Prof. CC Wolhuter

Prof. Charl Wolhuter studied at the University of Johannesburg, the University of Pretoria, the University of South Africa and the University of Stellenbosch, South Africa. He obtained a doctorate in Comparative Education at the University of Stellenbosch. Currently he is Comparative and International Education professor at the Potchefstroom Campus of the North-West University, South Africa. He has held Visiting Professorships at i.a. Brock University, Canada; Driestar Pedagogical University, the Netherlands, The University of Crete, Greece, Canterbury Christ University, United Kingdom, The University of Joensuu, Finland, the University of Queensland, Australia, the University of Modena and Reggio Emilia, Italy, Matak Bel University, Slovakia, Boris Grichenko University, Ukraine, University of Zhengzhou, China, University of Namibia, University of the Western Cape, South Africa, The Education University of Hong Kong and Eberhardt Karls University, Germany. He is the author of various books and articles on History of Education and Comparative Education.

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