Short Essay

Are Schools Replaceable?
Creative Destruction in the Post-Pandemic Society

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ABSTRACT

Lockdown measures and school closures in response to coronavirus have exposed and amplified the relationship between wealth and richer home-learning environments as well as the digital divides among students and among schools. Simultaneously, innovation processes seem to be occurring in response to the restrictive measures. The purpose of this short essay is to discuss the consequences of COVID-19 for students, pedagogy, and schools, particularly the relationship between socioeconomic conditions and possibilities of innovation in education. Based on Joseph Schumpeter's concept of creative destruction, we suggest that while some institutions may have the possibility of reinventing themselves by developing blended models of education, for a vast worldwide majority of students, traditional – which is to say, face-to-face and disconnected – schools are irreplaceable.

Keywords: Blended Learning, Education, Educational Innovation, Schools, Socioeconomic Influences

SCHOOL CLOSURES AND EQUITY

While writing these lines, the coronavirus pandemic stands as a worldwide crisis with almost no certainty about how events will unfold.

In this scenario, teaching has already been altered. Due to mandated nationwide closures, 1,500 million students are not attending school, which represents almost 90% of the world student population (UNESCO, 2020). With the pressure to carry on with the academic year, governments, schools, and teachers have been forced to find different and new ways to ensure learning continuity.

Initiatives across the world, however, have shown marked differences (Chang & Yano, 2020). And not surprisingly, these differences match each country's level of development and the socioeconomic status (SES) of the students the initiatives target. These variables had already created disparities in the students' learning opportunities before the crisis (OECD, 2016). But in the Coronavirus pandemic context, schools' potential to guarantee equity has become even more limited.

The resources that states and schools have been able to provide and the resources that students and their families have at home have shaped the different initiatives for distance teaching and learning. While some schools have successfully migrated to virtual learning platforms and have continued teaching through the use of video communication applications and diverse virtual resources, other institutions are struggling with basic issues such as keeping in contact with their students due to their lack of internet or phone connection. While economically advantaged families with higher levels of education have been able to support students, help them with their homework and provide activities to fill learning gaps, families living in poverty are struggling to balance work obligations with childcare. Now, more than ever, we can observe the strong association between wealth and richer home-learning environments for young children (UNICEF, 2019).

What is more, "home" is a wide and diverse concept. We can´t forget that millions of students live in contexts of high levels of poverty, hunger, family and environmental stress and exposure to violence, abuse, neglect, and exploitation. Worldwide, 3 in 4 young children are regularly subjected to violent discipline by their caregivers (UNICEF, 2017). Undernutrition is the cause of 3.1 million child deaths annually (UNICEF, World Health Organization [WHO], & The World Bank, 2018) and in many countries, school meals are often the only regular and nutritious meal a child receives daily (WFP, 2020). In the context of mandated school closures, not only have millions of students seen their learning opportunities disrupted, some have also lost their access to basic nourishment and to a safe space.

At the same time, the COVID-19 crisis shows the existing gap between those who have access to information and communication technologies and those who do not, a gap commonly known as the "first-level digital divide." It also allows us to better differentiate the existing gap in terms of *usage* of these technologies, a gap known as the "second-level digital divide". Moreover, it has shed light upon a "third-level digital divide:" the *institutional* gap, meaning the difference between schools that are able to give information and communication technologies an educational approach, thanks to their innovative attitude, the leadership skills of their principals and the level of instruction, training and dedication of their teachers, and those who are not (Fernandez Enguita, 2020). Sadly, we can expect the coronavirus pandemic to amplify these second and third divides since only some teachers will continue teaching through the use of such technologies and thus acquire or further develop experience in doing so, and only some students, *their* students, will continue to learn through the use of such technologies and thus acquire or further develop the needed skills. As a result, the COVID-19 crisis will enlarge the already existing socioeconomic gap among students regarding access to knowledge and school achievement. In turn, it will also affect their chances and possibilities of building their own future.

THE DAY AFTER LOCKDOWN: CREATIVE DESTRUCTION

And what about pedagogy in the post-pandemic crisis? For once, we could argue that the coronavirus pandemic presented itself as a powerful and accelerating force for innovation in schools. As described above, institutions all over the world had to find new and distinctive ways to continue teaching. Could this be the case of "creative destruction"?

In 1942, Austrian economist Joseph Schumpeter argued that innovation allows for dynamic efficiency, as firms compete to create new and distinctive products which are more valuable than those already existing in the market, thus displacing – destroying – those which become obsolete.

In the coming future we could expect innovative schools replacing traditional, face-to-face, and disconnected ones, by being able to give a more efficient and higher-quality education, responding to the characteristics of society in the digital era. However, it seems that one of the greatest dangers we could face in the post-COVID crisis is creative destruction happening only for some, while perpetuated obsolescence happening for many.

Most likely, the socioeconomic status of educational institutions and their communities will be an even stronger variable when it comes to define the future of education. Presumably, high-SES schools, those better standing on the digital divides, will be the case of innovation, further developing pedagogic approaches such as blended learning. This will add to an already rising trend before the COVID crisis (Picciano, Seaman et al., 2012). But by the same token, low-SES schools, those on the other side of the digital gap, will likely go back to traditional, exclusively face-to-face teaching. With little chance of changing their long-standing dynamics due to the lack of resources both at the institution and at home, and due to the key role they play in their students' welfare, these schools will stay the same.

The coronavirus pandemic shows that for some countries, and for wide sectors of the world population, there is still no available technology that could substitute schools as we know them without causing more inequality. For many schools, there is no chance of creative destruction. For their students, a traditional, disconnected, and face-to-face school is still irreplaceable.

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