

## QUESTIONS ASKED TO SCHOOL KNOWLEDGE BY COVID PANDEMIC

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The covid-19 pandemic has, for a time, deeply changed practices in Education worldwide, and some new concerns seem to have appeared, that previously were often hidden.

Among them are concerns about what schools teach and what students learn, and about the content itself of Education.

### 1. An ancient indifference

Although it does vary, depending on various historical and cultural models in the world, education has commonly and in most places been considered as an obvious and almost natural activity : people have never seen any other school than the one where they have been pupils. Neither have they ever had any idea of other school topics than those they have had to learn. All of us are like that. All of us, as post-children, are at risk of having a narrow mind, restricted to our personal and local school experience.

It sounds just as if every educational system had forgotten all the choices that were made among all that was teachable in human knowledge! All the same we must have two things in mind: first, the existence of an old tendency not to question what is taught at school, with some “teaching as usual” attitude. And second, the remembrance that schools can easily teach in a guilty way, guilty things, according to a guilty ideology, as it was the case for instance in Hitler’s Nazi Germany, during South Africa’s apartheid, and as it is still the case today in nationalist, belligerent or racist States. What schools teach matters and should never be taken for granted.

By the way we can easily find reasons why we often forget that what is taught matters: most educational systems often forget this just because they mainly and centrally focus on assessing and ranking students. Let’s keep in mind that we can perfectly assess and rank students on the way they learn and reinvest valuable knowledge, but also on the way they learn falsehoods, misconceptions or irrelevant topics! Many educational systems excel in assessing students using irrelevant tests: if I had time I would tell you about tests I found in various educational landscapes in the world, beginning with my own country, France.

Do people understand that the purpose of schooling is not just winning various competitions and getting the best marks? The purpose of schooling is learning, and what is taught shouldn’t be taught only because it has always been taught according to some tradition, but because it may help the students to better live in a complex world. What is at stake here emerges as very interesting and broad — but seldom considered — questions.

### 2. What did the pandemic do?

Interestingly, the pandemic has uncovered and revealed some previously hidden concerns. Let’s have a short look at what happened during this period as far as school and school knowledge are concerned : students had to work from home, with distant-learning activities, with the presence of their parents, and therefore what used to be sanctuarized school knowledge came out of the schools to appear in plain sight. Learning was no longer just a step to prepare some assessment or ranking, but represented some visible good in itself.

Furthermore, school knowledge got the opportunity to meet with family knowledge, vernacular knowledge, and sometimes vocational knowledge from the parents. Knowledge appeared both supported by distance-schooling and freed from the questionable power of the institution and teachers.

Moreover, the absence of classmates made everyone feel how peers are important on the road to learning and knowledge. Still more challenging: from the questions asked day after day by the pandemic itself the students were invited to think about scientific knowledge, about the meaning and the requirements of truth, vis à vis the bewitchment of falsehood. So to summarize, we can say that the pandemic has given us an extraordinary opportunity to question what has to be taught at school, as one of the most relevant questions any society must ask.

### 3. The question of falsehood makes a renewed commitment for truth necessary in schools

Our world is more confronted than ever to the broadcasting and spreading of fake news and conspiracy theories. The role of schools is to share efficient vaccines against fake news and conspiracy theories, if only in order to make students understand why they are so appealing to so many people.

Overall relativism is as dangerous as fake news in its ability to divert the students from their interest in truth: in some countries, the choice is left to the pupils to decide what is true and what is not : this is the case, for instance, with the history of the Universe, of life or of humankind!

Schools have a lot to do to strengthen the interest of students in searching the truth. The pandemic, with its tsunami of fake news, demonstrated this better than any previous factor.

### 4. When School knowledge meets other kinds of knowledge

As said before, the pandemic was an extraordinary opportunity for traditional school knowledge, often remaining formal and abstract, to meet, within the family frame, diverse pieces of knowledge that are external to its own traditions.

This just shows that the time when school knowledge was separated from others, as in a sanctuary, is gone. Not only does school knowledge have to open itself to new forms of knowledge which are necessary in a globalized world, but it also has to clarify its status : what is taught in school should not ignore or disregard what is learnt elsewhere. Other types of knowledge are present in the world, on the internet, in students' culture, in various religions, opinions and ideologies. Schools don't have to teach everything, of course, but on the contrary, they should choose and select among all the available knowledge what they intend to teach.

Besides this, it has become obvious that in this complex landscape, schools have to give students the necessary landmarks to guide them in the face of all kinds of knowledge which they meet and will continue to meet their whole life. A new role for schools would therefore be to help students in an overall mapping of knowledge, including through the choice of topics that school will cover or not.

## 5. The question of inequality between students emerging more centrally than ever before

During the pandemic it appeared more clearly than ever that from one society to another, and inside any given society, access to schooling and learning valuable knowledge was terribly unequal.

Obviously, if life on Earth has to be imagined differently after the covid disaster, we have to remember that it would not be acceptable to care about equitably sharing the vaccine and not to care about equitably sharing knowledge.

And equitably sharing knowledge is not only a question of broadcasting : it is a question of a shared dignity between the various human cultures. The pandemic has reminded us that we belong to a common species and that we have to be modest in front of nature, which is not our property. But first and foremost this modesty has to be adopted with respect to the cultural experiences of the various individuals and groups: biodiversity requires human diversity too, and not just one model imposed to all peoples, as it often was the case in the past and still is to this day.

## 6. Competing or cooperating?

We have already said that schools have dangerously become, throughout the world, a place of permanent and excessive competition: between students, between classes, between schools, between various school sectors (private and public), and finally between states if not between continents. Many students suffer from this, as well as from a bad school climate, and even more are discouraged, losing self confidence and therefore tending to fail their whole life long.

The pandemic has made people think about the overall pattern of competition according to the economic model of the struggle for life within market law. Values such as empathy, cooperation, protecting the weakest, contributing to the various societies and imagining strong public health services for all suddenly appear as central.

Schools themselves have to change: they should promote the values of cooperation and empathy that appeared so precious on the occasion of the pandemic, and they should limit stress at school and the role of assessment in this stress.

The schools humanity needs must teach natural selection according to Darwin, but insist on the fact that this law is exactly, excepting under totalitarian regimes, what must be rejected by human societies and by schools in the first place.

## 7. Private or public knowledge?

With the pandemic, people have understood the importance of collaboration of scientists in the public space, not only nationally but internationally too, and many were shocked when they understood that the coming vaccine might be reserved to some countries or some parts of societies. Secondly, the collaboration between various disciplines, from various fields of science, quantitative as well as qualitative, experimental as well as theoretical, appeared essential. Thirdly in the various countries it appeared that the existence of a strong public health service was of first importance.

So let us say that the context of increasing privatization of schools, of fragmentation and commodification of knowledge which has ruled most of the countries of the world for

decades, essentially for profit reasons, now reveals itself as a limited perspective. Conversely, school knowledge clearly appears as the first step to define knowledge as a public good for humankind rather than as a private factor, profitable only to the few.

## 8. No knowledge without conscience

If one lesson has to be learnt from what happens in the context of the pandemic, it is that knowledge has seldom had the same immediate importance for humankind as a whole : everyday, people everywhere are expecting the results of scientific experiments, the advancement of the research about vaccine, or are curious for the latest works of epidemiologists. Never has science been felt as so essential to the immediate survival of humanity. Never have people felt that scientific results are not some external phenomenon but are clearly linked to the decisions of investments taken or not by politicians either to answer public needs or to foster profit.

It immediately appears that there is a gap between what technologies suggest and allow, and the expectations of people in the name of freedom: is it, for instance, acceptable to trace covid-suspected people with their smartphones? There is no science or technology that doesn't raise immediate and hard questions about their ethical implications for human societies. Should we tackle this type of questions, at the time of algorithms and artificial intelligence, at school? I am afraid often we do not.

And what about the political decisions daily and publicly taken after consultations with teams of scientists? Is that not an extraordinary invitation to reflect upon what science is in and of itself, and what it represents for people? In our contemporary societies where science and technology are so important, schools must help students to think about the ethical meaning of knowledge, to practice critical thinking when dealing with science and technology.

School knowledge has, nowadays, a great responsibility: the question of the meaning and ethics of knowledge cannot be averted any more. School knowledge has to be responsible in front of each student as a person, responsible in front of the various communities it belongs to (including national communities) responsible in front of Humanity and last but not least, responsible in front of the Planet.