Rethinking and innovating education in the pandemic? Philosophy of Education at the forefront of 'Educational Futures'

Philosophy of Education

We are living in precarious times. Covid-19 has affected all of our existence, including education and educational futures. Covid-19 has altered and changed the way we interact with the basic premise of education that we have understood in more or less the same ways for a substantial amount of time: the place and space where the education takes place; the educational foundations that were clearly linked with the physical structure of the school and schooling; and the idea of the teacher – who is the person who delivers and facilitates education; and who is the learner. Now, all of this has essentially changed. As such, Covid-19 has made us completely rethink the foundations of education. It has changed the way we are living, the ways in which we are thinking about education, and most particularly the ways in which we are considering what education is and what educational futures should look like.

From the outset, this thought piece is foregrounded by three thinkers – philosophers, from different eras, times and countries. The first is Aristotle, with his statement that "the educated differ from the uneducated as much as the living from the dead". The second is John Dewey, who argued that "education is not preparation for life; education is life itself". And the third is Nelson Mandela, with his statement that "education is the most powerful weapon which you can use to change the world".

Philosophy of Education, Schools and Students

Much work has been devoted to thinking about the world post-COVID-19. However, philosophy of education has been in this process arguably forever but largely remains underappreciated and undervalued, its contribution notably absent from discussions of the re-building of the society and the rethinking of our educational futures. I would like some strands where the philosophy of education could be useful in the rebuilding of society and moving us forward towards the future.

Firstly, to understand the present and future of the philosophy of the educational system, we do need to understand our respective countries' histories and the genealogy of the educational thought – whether it is New Zealand, Indonesia or Vietnam. No educational thought in any of these countries exists on its own, as each and every thought has its own histories of the present, knowledge systems, ontologies and power relations that portray and lead us to our educational futures. And this forms the foundation of thinking about philosophy of education – who we are in relation to education, what we understand as curriculum and why, and what pedagogical thoughts are determining our educational identities.

Secondly, it is important now more than ever to link our thinking about philosophy of education with the philosophy of children and childhoods, and thinking for children and for childhoods. I used purposefully the term 'childhoods', as it demonstrates how there is no singularity to childhood, and the multiplicity of ways through which we understand, conceptualise and engage with diverse children and their childhoods. The way we educate children and thus shape their childhoods is linked with the thinking around the image of a child.

The image of the child is a philosophical thought about how we think of each child; for example, we may view a child as competent, as needy, as precious, as innocent, etc. This image of the child – as adults, teachers and parents – we then apply towards adult – child philosophical relations; and this image thus shapes power relations. All these images of children will require us to utilize very different philosophical approaches to teaching and learning, and equally to child rearing. For example, if we perceive child as ontologically incomplete and in a need of constant learning and support, we

will set up a philosophy of education for the child as such – the child will become powerless, we will 'pour' knowledge into the child; and prepare the child for the future; rather than focus on where the child is at the moment (Tesar et al., 2019). Similarly, if we perceive the child as an innocent, the child will be powerless again; but this time adults will try to remove all the obstacles and dangers and act as a protector of child. However, if we see the child as agentic - as someone who is a co-constructor of decision making and knowledge; who is an ontologically partner to adults, we can speak about the agency, power relations, and decision making that leads to a different view of philosophy of education, and teaching and learning, and child formation (Tesar & Arndt, 2020).

Thirdly, a number of countries around the world have been struggling and suffocating from the dominance of Western educational thought and philosophical systems, and associated epistemology, ontology, and ethics. Countries in the Antipodes and South East Asia have been continuously exposed to the colonial exceptionalism that has allowed Western thought to dominate, and to dictate the direction often via cultural and financial dominance (Scholarships; investments, donors, funded reports) utilizing Western philosophy and Western thought. In such an environment, Indigenous thinking and local knowledges have been marginalized and marked as insignificant; educational export has become one of the most profitable businesses, and the local educational systems and knowledges were struggling and became powerless.

Educational Futures and Covid-19

In the world pre-Covid-19, teachers have been receiving a clear nod from schools and some academic experts that their programmes and courses should start being translated and slowly become part of online offerings, in one shape and form or another. This policy push was sometimes a direct request, but often, as some teachers say, a 'playful wink' that was supposed to push online teaching and learning to the forefront of pedagogical offerings in schools. The arguments for this shift were quite clear: both enhancing the democratic nature of teaching and learning and providing accessibility of studies to those who cannot attend classes in person – for personal reasons or decisions, because of geography or economic necessity. The other idea was portraying the line of thought that online teaching and learning is equally as effective as face to face offering, but far more cost-effective.

Critique of these ideas has been very vocal. The problem was that online teaching and learning was not really thought through; the ideas of digital literacy and digital pedagogies were mostly unexplored, and rarely prompted any in-depth thought from the programme directors or lecturing staff, who received minimal support when designing online offerings. Online teaching and learning was masquerading the verbatim 'lift' of the content from face to face classes and simply 'dropping' it into an online space. As the call for greater accessibility of online teaching and learning grew, and more and more thinking went into how to make online teaching and learning work, more and more teachers were protesting and calling for a return to face to face offerings. They argued that there was minimal meaningful investment in online teaching and learning; there were no necessary adjustments of assessments or to the volume of work required of them (and students); or of the way the content was delivered without any further pedagogical considerations.

When Covid-19 forced all teachers to move classes online, literally overnight – the whole world has plugged in – it has highlighted the state of both academic and teachers' community. Everything, within a couple of days' notice, moved online, and the results have demonstrated both the creativity, but also the instrumental nature of teachers and academics. It has showcased how the education system lacks meaningful research into digital pedagogies and teaching and learning, that can be translated to teachers and schools and also to academic colleagues. It was, in short, described as the inherent shock of moving to the online space, the heightened sense of unequal and undemocratic practices, the unfairness of the online system and the way the white, the male, the

middle class are again privileged in the space of Covid-19 – something that we were warned about but did not necessarily listen to before the pandemic has taken place (Littlejohn & Hood, 2018).

Slow changes to education and curriculum were not able to withstand or to provide meaningful thought to this sudden change. Overnight, we have shattered the overall structure of our school programs and units, our plans, our academic rules and processes. We have no longer debated whether online teaching and learning was the future of education. The answer was here. There's been more and more questions about why things were happening; rather than answers; and no one has protested as there were no other policy or other answers to the condition we have found ourselves in. Once again, the philosophy of education has been missing from these debates, to provide questions and understandings to the underpinnings of these debates.

Firstly, there were some academics who have argued that online was the very idea of an outward thinking school, reaching towards its community, and liberating education from vast sandstone campuses. It facilitated opportunities for spreading and issuing education to a much broader audience and to students who traditionally would maybe be studying by correspondence, or at a distance, or were not able to come to school campus due to requirements of physical distancing (sometimes referred to as a social distancing). Students have become very much part of the everyday, mundane culture through being connected online; where more and more courses required a blended model; and that education was considered somewhat relevant to the idea that if the courses are online, that they are more progressive, more democratic facilitating wider engagement and equity. Furthermore, trickling down from the educational administration was also an increasingly prevalent economic argument. Similar movements appeared in Higher Education. Online teaching and learning required fewer resources and less expenditure, enabling more students to be enrolled in the online platform compared to the physical classroom. Collective tasks and peer assessment have become standard to reduce academic workload and thus to make some contracts to expire. What was once considered to be exciting and innovative, now has become pedestrian and directly affecting academics jobs.

The academics' thinking of pre-Covid-19 times that the online is not here to change the world but was somewhat complementary to the traditional face to face offerings, somewhat testifies the idea of teaching and learning that had been occurring over many decades and remained more or less the same before the pandemic. This has been demonstrated by schools and universities' investment into campus facilities. Similarly, a lot of these capital investments were relying on the idea that they will offer different fee structures for students coming from overseas, and the discourse and KPIs around mobility and international students who can create additional revenue streams were part of debates of Universities of all tiers – from the top ranked to the provincial.

Covid-19 has diminished the premise that online is just for some students and not for others; as well as the premise of an ever-increasing pipeline of international students that should be subsidizing and offsetting costs for schools and Universities, enabling them to offer high quality teaching, learning and research, and service. Both of these ideas – 'uncertain online futures' and 'an endless pipeline of international students' have turned out to be false.

Post-Covid-19 Education?

We are moving to a 'post-Covid-19' world. 'Post' is an interesting predicament because it is clear that we cannot be – anytime soon - post Covid-19. It is likely, that we will carry Covid-19 with us for a very long time, and not necessarily in a linear progression. As such, it may mean a very long, unclear and messy transformation. For years, we've been exposed various thinkers and writers reflecting and writing up the histories and futures of educational thought (Tesar & Arndt, 2019). We have in this Covid-19 world perhaps became even greater strangers to ourselves in the educational world, as the otherness is enhanced through the physical distancing and social isolation policy.

There is no doubt that we are currently living in a time that our generation will remember forever. We have already started to use the language of 'new normality', which has taken over the novelty, the fear, the temporality of such engagement. What is 'new' about this 'new normality', and what is 'normality' in this 'new normality', are some of the questions that we will have to address. And most importantly, can we put this online genie back into its bottle?

Philosophy of education can thus tell us something about the post-Covid world in relation to how knowledge is associated with language and power; and how ethical decision making of today impacts upon our educational futures. While Covid-19 brought us overnight change – the demise of a human – body in pedagogy and curriculum; between the teacher and a student and within teaching teams; the wink in the classroom; the way child learns from the child next to them. While no doubt many countries around the world are returning to 'normality' – pre Covid-19 engagement; it is a philosophy of education that is often missing in considering what has happened in the past month- what is there to learn from this experience – and how can we utilize philosophy of education – of teaching and learning; of the child/hoods – to understand and tease out a way foreword rather than rush back to the normality. And perhaps most importantly, to reflect on how in the time of crises it became the most visible the impact on middle class children, with devices and learning spaces and support at home; and those from poor background where the physical concept of school was the only way of how to learn.

All of this above can tell us about educational futures in the post-Covid-19 world. How the classroom should look like? What and how should we learn? What is the driving educational thought? How can we utilise a global philosophy of education outlook that will link both Western understanding and Indigenous, local thinking? The local curriculum and local pedagogies are hopefully more and more elevated during this time – of interrupted supply chains, including overseas educational experts that are to change non-Western educational systems. One positive thought that Covid-19 has brought to us is that we are witnessing a greater focus on the local environment, local streets and neighborhoods, local land and local knowledges. The whole world was for the first time grounded to its local spaces and places, and perhaps not only physically, but also philosophically we have been forced to stay at the same space. And, we started to utilize that space around us as our approach to education and understanding that educating and learning locally really makes sense.

References

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