Turning a curse into a blessing: teachers' reflections on how education has benefited from the COVID-19 disruption

Conference abstract

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Abstract

The COVID-19 pandemic caused a major disruption to education, most notably through forcing schools to close and employ 'emergency remote teaching' (Hodges et al., 2020). Although this disruption gave rise to multiple problems (for a review of key issues, see e.g., Muñoz-Najar et al., 2021; Stringer & Keys, 2021; Thorn & Vincent-Lancrin, 2021), it also provided a rare opportunity for re-thinking education. For example, it encouraged teachers to re-examine their instructional approach and philosophy, and to experiment with new ways of working. As such, it is likely to have generated new perspectives and capacities. As we gradually move to a post-pandemic era and slowly revert to pre-pandemic habits and modes of working, there is a risk that any reflection triggered by the pandemic on the educational status quo, or any possibilities identified about the future of education, may be forgotten or lost. These reflections and future directions arguably represent, or contain, important 'seeds of change' and, as such, it is crucial that they are captured. To this end, this study sought to investigate the positive influence that the pandemic may have had on education. While there have been some calls within the academic community to view the pandemic as an opportunity to re-imagine education (e.g., Zhao, 2020), there do not seem to be many – if any – systematic, empirical efforts to examine the educational benefits of the pandemic.

To illuminate this more productive – and thus far less acknowledged – side of the COVID-19 disruption, this study drew upon a series of 90-minute, in-depth interviews with 13 teachers. The teachers worked in schools located in different countries, thereby helping to provide a more global perspective of the possibilities that the pandemic may have created for education. The interviewees constituted a diverse group: they represented different education sectors (early years, primary and secondary), worked in different types of school (state-funded and private), taught different subjects, and their teaching experience ranged from six to 35 years. The interviews were transcribed and then subjected to thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2021) in MAXQDA (VERBI Software, 2021).

The interview analysis indicated that the positive impact of the pandemic on education is multifaceted, extending to at least four domains: the ideational, the affective, the behavioural and the relational. These four domains relate to how key educational actors (e.g., teachers, students, parents) *think*, *feel*, *act*, and *relate* to one another, respectively. At an ideational level, for example, the analysis showed that the COVID-19 disruption benefited education by challenging dominant ideologies and practices, and by drawing attention to other possibilities for doing education. Embracing outdoor learning, placing greater emphasis on student wellbeing and mental health, considering alternative approaches to student assessment, recognising the potential benefits of hybrid lessons for certain sub-groups of students, delivering education in a more environmentally-friendly way ('paperless classrooms'), and allowing students to use electronic devices as learning tools in face-to-face lessons, are only some of the directions that the disruption has illuminated.

This paper will present the ideational benefits in more detail, as well as the benefits that pertain to the affective domain (emotions and attitudes), the behavioural domain (practices) and the relational domain (interpersonal relationships). It will then argue that, if embraced and pursued, the identified trends and/or directions can pave the way for education to become not only more effective, but also more inclusive, resilient and environmentally friendly in the future. Through capturing and documenting these 'seeds of change', this study

hopes to reinvigorate and inform discussions about the future(s) of education. More importantly, it hopes to help sustain the unprecedented momentum for educational change created by the disruption, which seems to be at risk of being lost as the pre-pandemic ways of doing education are gradually being restored across the globe.

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