

No Turning Back? Reflections on Education during the Pandemic

By Will Brehm

Thank you for inviting me to speak at the Japan Educational Research Association webinar entitled "Pandemic and Education." I left Tokyo on November 10, 2019 after 4 years and I never thought my life would change so drastically. Since arriving in London to work at the UCL institute of education, there have been two strikes, the largest victory of the Tory party in British history, and a pandemic that has forced me to work from home longer than I worked in my new office.

In this chaos there has still been some joy in my new city. One of my favorite parts of lockdown has been my morning walks. I'd leave early enough to avoid most people but late enough where I could still enjoy the Spring and now Summer weather. Each morning I would cross the street in front of my East London flat, and pass a graffitied sign on the walking path under my feet. It read, "No turning back." I have no idea who painted it, but I first noticed it in early April. To me, it captured a prevailing attitude that the pandemic has forced us to change, presumably for the better. We would never be normal again.

The problem is: I don't think this attitude will be true. I think we are in fact turning back and embracing all the wrong things. Let me explain.

The impact of the coronavirus on education systems has rightly been a massive topic of discussion these past few months. The most obvious issue has been the worldwide school closures and the way this impact was unequally felt by different groups. Children from poor families or where domestic violence is prevalent are likely worse off than children from families with more disposable income or a sense of safety and security. Additionally, working and parenting is nearly impossible under the same roof without massive support systems in place. These too are not shared equally. These are serious issues that need to be explored as they will certainly impact whatever future lies ahead.

What I find interesting though, is the focus on a so-called "learning gap" that might arise because of the school closures. The narrative around a "learning gap" from covid-19 is problematic firstly because it assumes learning only takes place inside schools. Obviously, children did not stop learning by being

at home. They just learned differently. They learned things not on any curriculum. It's sometimes hard for us educationalists to admit that students don't need schools to learn.

Another problem I see with the notion of a "learning gap" is that it is thought of in terms of learning outcomes which are then connected to more years of schooling at a higher quality, which are then correlated to various social and economic outcomes: higher incomes, healthier lives, etc. In this rather old and tired logic of human capital theory, school closures are bad because students aren't learning the material that will be tested which will somehow produce negative life outcomes. Or so says the Education Production Function. The key from this perspective is to open up schools as quickly as possible.

But what if the ways in which we measure learning are wrong? What if standardized testing systems aren't the best ways to measure learning? I'd hope that the pandemic would force education systems to shake off this fetish for measurable and comparable learning outcomes like that on PISA, that there is no going back to the world of learning metrics and rates of return analyses. But I fear it's too naïve to think that my dream will be the case.

The United Kingdom is case in point. Covid 19 has thrown its secondary school examination system – and subsequently university calendars -- into chaos. Before covid-19, students in their final year of secondary school would apply to university in January. Teachers would predict students' grades for the applications, which were notoriously wrong especially for minority students. Students would sit school leaving examinations in Spring, accept a university offer in June, receive their examinations results in August, and begin university in September. If a student scored under or over what their teachers had predicted in January, a mad dash would ensue to find a different university spot. They call this process between August and September "University Clearing."

With Covid, this whole process has been thrown into disarray. Students missed a large amount of examination preparation at the end of the year and could not sit the examination in a safe way. Universities subsequently have had to radically change their acceptance process. It was in this environment that the government announced it would explore revising this system. Perhaps not going back was finally going to be a reality! The proposed change

was to change the university application deadline from January to after secondary examinations. To achieve this, either the examinations needed to take place sooner or universities need to start later, or perhaps a little of both.

What I found so interesting in this moment of system-level change is that at no time did anyone question the very *need* of a secondary school examination system. What if the solution to this problem is to remove the need for a standardized examination result to enter into university? This would ultimately end our collective belief in meritocracy which has more or less re-enforced the privileging of inherited wealth since the end of feudalism. This is the type of thinking that I find missing in our current moment, despite all the pronouncements that we are never going back to the old system. In fact, the old system is simply being tweaked and refined without critical reflection, keep in place the same inequalities that existed prior to coronavirus.

The school closures also showed a purpose of education that few people before Covid-10 really recognized. Many argue that schooling socializes children into society, teaches young people how to be citizens in a national and/or global community, and prepares them for some future labor market that no one really knows what will look like. But covid-19 has laid bare the fact that for many family's education is simply a form of state-sponsored day care needed so parents can work today, in the present moment. It's a completely different temporal purpose of schooling: school is not about some future citizen, member of society, or worker, but rather about today's economic demands of earning enough money to buy food and pay rent. Take school away and parents struggle immediately, some more than others. That's an important insight that can get lost in melioristic rhetoric common in education circles.

What might education research look like post-covid? I would hope a global critique of meritocracy would emerge. If the UK case is any indicator, that is probably unlikely. What I do think will happen is that research on education in emergencies will go mainstream. Lessons from refugee camps or in sites of conflict will offer lessons for the world over. The world is in an emergency now so learning from past emergencies seems obvious. This will likely lead to the re-birth of the idea of resilience. I suspect we'll see this – perhaps in name only -- in a lot of education policy and planning going forward. And this is where I think Japan could take a clear global leadership role. Its years of

expertise in planning for earthquakes offers valuable ways for school systems to balance risk, be resilient, and learn how to exist in the world when an emergency can emerge at any moment.

One final note about Japan's future role in our post-covid education world, specifically related to the higher education sector. I hope Covid-19 shows that following neoliberal policies is the wrong path to take in higher education. In particular, the push for international students as a revenue stream make no sense if international travel is not possible. Japanese universities are not currently dependent on international students' fees like some other universities in the UK, Australia, or the USA. I would hope Japan continues to view internationalization not simply in financial terms. Understanding the purpose of internationalization of higher education beyond finance is another topic Japan could pioneer globally. So instead of saying no turning back, let's learn how to do things differently by valuing education beyond simplistic economic metrics.

Thank you.

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