

States of Emergency: Education in a Time of COVID-19

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It is for one reason only that we call our epoch modern: people of the West have been so captivated and impressed by their own great deeds that they found the courage to proclaim that they had created the world on their own.
- Peter Sloterdijk (1989/2020, p. 2)

Ideas about our own great deeds and the belief that we had created the world on our own were confronted in 2020 by a microscopic spike protein that effortlessly fused a novel coronavirus with human cells. We thought we had learned “to create nature in addition to history” and “to carry out an infinite project on a finite basis” – ideas reflected in and advanced through our education systems – but the pandemic’s exponential death rates, constant waves of infections and new mutations of the virus, which forced the world’s population and its variegated education systems and projects into various states of social distancing, lockdowns and, for some, a hysteria of denial or anxiety, showed clearly that the “bubble of modernity’s kinetic utopia has burst” (Sloterdijk, 1989/2020, p. 2, 151, 3).

Just about every idea in circulation about education was called into question: what it was for, where it took place, who was involved, and how it was experienced. Modern mass schooling was no longer the great equaliser we had believed it once was, calling into question the education projects that had been based on meritocracy and so interwoven with a need to make the future better than the present (Sandel, 2020). Our past calls for equality rang hollow when work and study from home were reserved for the privileged few who could access technology, when vaccines were hoarded by the global North, and when EdTech companies made huge fortunes providing the means to sustain some sort of educational provision but at the expense of locking millions out of vital forms of knowledge. What we thought we knew for

certain was no longer certain at all. Except, of course, capital’s ability to find new forms of exploitation and profit despite (or because of?) the pandemic. How then can we make sense of this state of emergency while it still rages around the world?

Our starting point for this *NORRAG Special Issue* has been to conceptualise the emergency not in the singular but in the multiple. Although *likely* having a zoonotic source, SARS-Cov-2 – the virus that causes the COVID-19 disease – is not only a biological and health emergency. It is also a political emergency, an economic emergency and a social emergency intertwined. Its educational dynamics and forms of emergency weave through these larger processes into what Kenway and Epstein (2021) call “the global COVID-19 conjuncture.” Read in its entirety, this *NORRAG Special Issue* highlights the ways in which these emergencies in education are interconnected.

Many theorists have framed the emergency without distilling its significance for the many formations of education. Giorgio Agamben (2020) feared the COVID-19 pandemic would create a political emergency he called a “state of exception” whereby authoritarian rule would thrive at the expense of individual sovereignty and democratic polity. David Harvey (2020, para. 11, 55) recognised an economic emergency in the “situation of an old, collapsing bourgeois society” and saw the nascent formation of a new, “highly gendered, racialized, and ethnicized” working class whose members “bear two burdens: at one and the same time, they are the workers most at risk of contracting the virus through their jobs, and of being laid off with no financial resources because of the economic retrenchment enforced by the virus.” Slavoj Žižek (2020, p. 3), meanwhile, recognized a brewing social emergency early in the pandemic where “corporeal distancing” – the most antisocial behaviour humanly possible – was essential

to fight the spread of COVID-19. Yet, he saw this as an opportunity: “it is only now, when I have to avoid many of those who are close to me, that I fully experience their presence, their importance to me.” These public intellectuals were not entirely wrong in their prognoses, although their hopes for [democratic revival](#), [economic collectivism](#) and [social reimagining](#), all with educational implications, have been far less successful and certainly not universal.

The political, economic and social dimensions of the emergency brought on by the coronavirus pandemic impacted education and international development. Schools and tertiary education institutions closed around the world, often exacerbating existing inequalities in society. As some low fee private schools closed their doors for good, students who had attended these schools, flocked en masse to mainstream schools, [adding pressure to already stretched public systems](#). Gender based violence, [although difficult to measure](#), increased for some children who could not seek protection at school. The closure of school feeding programmes brought [hunger](#) and ill health. Many people finally acknowledged that [teachers are front-line care workers](#), raising important questions of labour rights, representation and local relationships in the education sector. Some schools embraced technology to provide forms of learning for children, but these patterns mostly benefited wealthy households and wealthy countries. No computer or internet access meant no school-linked learning for many children (Hossain, 2021). Technology companies meanwhile have seen profits soar, finally realising the long sought-after goal of some who work in this business of “disrupting” the education sector (Williamson & Hogan, 2021). The economic impact of the pandemic will force some countries to cut education budgets in the short and long-term, despite policy affirmations of protection (Lennox et al., 2021). These dynamics have left the future of education, and those who work in and with the sector, in various states of emergency.

Actors at the global level, many linked with United Nations agencies, sometimes seen as making up a “global architecture of education” (for a critique, see [Hugh McLean’s response](#) to Beehary, 2021), responded to the pandemic in ways that illuminated some longstanding tensions between global organisations and domestic actors regarding the priorities of the global, the national, the local and how these are interconnected. Some of the fault lines exposed relating to knowledge formation and information in public health – and how fit for purpose the global architecture is – are also apposite for education. At the exact time as many low and middle-income countries required additional financing to education to overcome the pandemic, donor assistance through aid budgets was [projected](#) to be cut. Some donors, such as the UK’s Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (FCDO), reformulated their

policy priorities with key policy declarations failing to explicitly mention commitments to reduce poverty or support lifelong learning (FCDO, 2021). The structures that articulate the global education community struggled to ensure a flow of assistance to countries and people most in need. The architecture for planning and sustaining transformative change during a global emergency, such as COVID-19, and beyond requires scrutiny.

Many organisations that work on the global stage have used the pandemic to further priorities associated with the narrow view of learning metrics formulated before it hit ([see Will Smith’s presentation](#)). This can be seen most explicitly in the idea of a precisely measured form of “learning loss” caused by COVID-related school closures and/or inadequate remote learning. This argument suggests the mere presence of a child *in* school is equated with learning while absence is assumed to cause a learning loss (Kuhfeld, 2019). During the pandemic, this linear concept of learning has been linked with quantifiable losses in [lifetime earnings](#). When learning is made commensurable across systems through some standard metric, it is easy to link schooling to economic growth and then use econometric modelling to determine which systems produce the most “learning.” Learning loss is thus the latest discourse in education to reduce “complex processes [of learning] to simple numerical indicators and rankings for purposes of management and control” (Shore & Wright, 2015, p. 22; see also Gorur, 2016; Unterhalter, 2019; Piattoeva & Boden, 2020). The richness of learning and the [multiple sites](#) in which it takes place, so evident during the pandemic, is lost in these linear measures. As [Pasi Shalberg](#) wrote, “We need to let go of the myth that seat time equals learning.”

Historicising the educational discourses emerging during the pandemic is a useful way to understand some of the tensions in education and international development as a field of policy, practice, theory and empirical research. The narrative of “learning loss” is supported by many actors advocating greater use of technology and standardised testing in education (Williamson & Hogan, 2021, p. 8). The idea echoes to the discourse of a [global learning crisis](#) articulated from around 2010 (Benavot & Smith, 2020). Setting out the contours of this discourse, and some of the ideas it mobilised, is not to ignore the significant challenges of quality and equality for education systems and provision for the poorest children and countries; however, ideas that the key problem of the pandemic has been learning loss advance a longstanding priority of some development actors of creating and using [global learning metrics](#) as a way of determining which systems are providing a supposedly quality education to students. This contrasts with conceptualising quality education in broad, inclusive terms concerned not just with schooling for children, but with lifelong learning

oriented to address intersecting inequalities, injustices and supporting sustainable development (McCowan & Unterhalter, 2021). This tension threads through the Sustainable Development Goal on education (Wulff, 2020).

Many commentators have sought to make sense of the pandemic's impact on education – not least in terms of learning loss – through data and its visualisation. [Living maps](#) showed, for instance, the number of out of school children, the time in which schools were closed and where teachers were prioritised for vaccinations. In many ways, these interactive maps mirrored the real-time coronavirus maps developed for public health purposes by institutions such as [Johns Hopkins](#), [Our World In Data](#) and [Oxford University](#), which mapped cases, hospitalisations, deaths, vaccinations, and public policy responses. Not only do these real time data and data visualisations help “governing by numbers” (Rose, 1991), but also, they provide individuals with a sense of certainty and control in a time of crisis as well as an opportunity for EdTech companies to profit from the massive data being produced. Some of these processes are important for holding governments to account and living maps can be useful in highlighting whether or not poverty and other inequalities are or are not being considered. But the reliance on living maps as the main source of information on the pandemic without consideration of a wider range of data sources and processes of discussion and reflection on what the maps show, begs questions around which methods and data are being prioritised and how full or narrow a picture they can provide; whose knowledge is valued; which norms we are assuming to be universal; whether and how school data should be kept private; and how we are to understand the specificities of the national and the local. Asking questions about these issues is something scholars in the field of education and international development are good at.

For us to begin to make sense of the states of emergency in the field of education and international development laid bare by COVID-19, we must see these multiple emergencies as interwoven, each building off and reinforcing the other and connected to pre-existing histories. But can we be more explicit rather than merely recognising political, economic and social dimensions of our current predicament? In organising the analysis for this *NORRAG Special Issue*, we identified the changing formations of education associated with six interconnected sites, all of which have political, economic, and social dimensions. These sites are: Inequality, Technology, States, Progress, Affect and Nature. These six sites shape and are shaped by the modalities of education – curricular, pedagogic, organisational, associative and evaluative. The historical conditions of possibility and impossibility of education in particular locales have been exposed by the pandemic, which the articles in this *NORRAG Special Issue* make clear. These interconnected sites are ordered in the *NORRAG Special Issue* to start with areas

most often discussed during the pandemic: Inequality and Technology. The analysis then moves to areas we feel have been less discussed but are equally important to consider: States, Progress and Affect. The *NORRAG Special Issue* ends with a subsection entitled Nature. This seemingly brings us to where we began, with a focus on a biological emergency that foretells or prefigures other emergencies associated with dislocations. In this case, the section focuses on the Climate Emergency and its connection to the pandemic.

The arc of the argument across the *NORRAG Special Issue* is curated so that each sub-section presents a set of focussed discussions. A key piece starts each thematic part. The other contributions within that part refer to and engage with the arguments presented in the key piece, each starting from a particular viewpoint, experience or problem. This dialogue across pieces is intended as a dialectic, opening new spaces of thought and praxis.

Part 1 focuses on the site of Inequalities. Indeed, it has become almost a truism to say that the pandemic revealed and furthered inequalities globally, nationally and locally. Many of the pieces across the *NORRAG Special Issue*, responding to some of the wider themes, also bring up the issue of inequalities. Thus, it made sense to us as editors to start the *NORRAG Special Issue* with this important, cross-cutting site. The section starts with a key piece by Frances Stewart who outlines the unequalising effects of COVID-19 on education, drawing out how inequalities for children have been deepened because of the pre-existing inequalities with regard to the education levels of their parents. Six articles respond to and build off Stewart's piece. Across these pieces, some of the most marginalised and excluded groups are highlighted, from Indigenous communities in Peru (Johnson & Levitan), to children with disabilities in Canada (Francis et al.), to students in conflict-affected contexts (Cameron). The inequalities within education systems are also highlighted, noting some effects in relation to the private sector in Nigeria (Robinson & Hussain), equitable learning and information sharing between administrative levels in Ethiopia (Yorke et al.) and the extent of headteacher autonomy in India (Moore & Kameshwara). It becomes clear that experiences of inequality caused by this pandemic have not been equal. Some groups have suffered far more than others and some education systems have had more inequality or equality producing processes than others.

Part 2 focuses on the site of Technology, another major area often discussed in the nascent literature on COVID-19 and education. This part starts with a key piece by Ulrike Rivett, who reflects on her own experiences switching to online learning in early 2020. She questions the meaning of a university when it has no physical community. Four pieces respond to this key piece, highlighting both the positive

benefits and negative consequences technology has had on education during the pandemic. For some, technology provided the needed tools to continue education despite the disruptions created by lockdowns, social distancing and mask mandates (Moldavan; Anand & Lall). For others, technology became a new source of inequality (Câmara; Crompton et al.).

In Part 3, the focus is on States. How and to what effect has the state been reconfigured during the pandemic? In many countries where states had espoused austerity and neoliberal policies, celebrating the free-market for decades, there was a marked change in discourse, and state intervention into social and economic life was quickly adopted. The role of public goods such as health care and education became commonly discussed and central to presentations of state legitimacy. Building off these changes, Adam Habib writes in the key piece for this section, it is important to focus on the need to create institutions that support states with developing social justice post-pandemic and for the institutionalisation through education and research that gives attention to local contextualisation of any globally developed solutions. His key piece is followed by four pieces that explore the impact of COVID-19 on education in a range of states and institutional formations, including small island states (the Maldives; Muna et al.) and contested states (Kashmir; Andrabi & Kadiwal) as well as from the perspective of an international body that works with all states and aims to build back resilient, echoing parts of the 2015 Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction (Castle et al.).

Part 4 widens the focus to one of the tenets of modernity critiqued by Sloterdijk (1989/2020, p. 2): Progress. Here, Keita Takayama writes a key piece that rethinks time and our desire to make education “chunkable,” a source of governing by numbers. He reflects on the disruptions caused by the pandemic as providing accidental moments of learning, moments often missed when we focus our educational efforts on achieving some sort of linear progress. In Malaysia, Balakrishnan & Johar argue the pandemic has furthered the blurring of boundaries between public and private actors in education and the views about time they articulate. In Sierra Leone, historical lessons from the Ebola epidemic were used to overcome some of the challenges brought on by COVID-19 (Durrani et al.). COVID-19 has clearly challenged the commonplace notion of Progress, but it is unlikely to remove it entirely within educational discourses, and the idea of learning from the past or the present to think better for the future is a theme with which all three engage.

Part 5 looks at the pandemic and its impact on education from the lens of Affect. In his key piece, Irving Epstein outlines four themes found in theories of affect – intensity of encounter, meaning-making, assemblage and contingency. These, he argues, help him make sense of the disrupted

and difficult lived experiences of students and teachers brought on by COVID-19. Three pieces in this section apply one or more of the four themes Epstein outlines in different contexts, looking at freelance creative workers in London (Derrick & Harris), the impact of EdTech on student wellbeing in 8 countries (Towne) and student experiences in Japanese universities (Clark et al.). Some consider there is explanatory weight to Epstein’s analysis, while for others it presents too negative a reading of the processes of meaning-making.

Finally in Part 6, the *NORRAG Special Issue* turns to the next emergency already with us. This section is called Nature and explores the connections between, and lessons learned from the COVID-19 pandemic for the climate emergency. Jeremy Rappleye, Hikaru Komatsu and Iveta Silova argue in their key piece that the cultural practices that emphasise collective wellbeing rather than individualism were shown to be successful during the pandemic and will be essential for surviving the climate emergency. Four pieces build off and critique this argument. Pegram & Kreienkamp advocate using complexity theory to make sense of global challenges; Adams argues for the use of permaculture as a pedagogical approach for sustainable education; and Molloy Murphy calls for a shift from management ideas, which assume it is possible to master nature, to reciprocal relations of care. The section and the *NORRAG Special Issue* conclude with a piece that weaves together elements of the six sites identified into a call to rethink education in times of the climate crisis and not counterpose so sharply science and other ways of knowing, but to develop a pluralistic, multi-faceted approach attentive to the complexity of education (McKenzie & Kwauk). This ending is also a beginning for the next *NORRAG Special Issue*, “Education in Times of Climate Change” edited by Heila Lotz-Sisikta and Eureka Rosenberg.

Overall, the *NORRAG Special Issue* contains 29 chapters authored by 66 people who are affiliated with various institutions from across the world, including, universities, schools, community organisations, civil society and the private sector. The chapters deal with every phase of education from early years to postgraduate study. They focus on a wide range of actors including children, parents, teachers, administrators, creative industry workers, institutional leaders and commentators. Authors utilise a diversity of methodologies, some collecting data using innovative ways given travel restrictions and social distancing in some jurisdictions. Some deploy familiar conceptual frames, while others consider the need for new forms of theory. The work as a whole illuminates how profound the changes in education have been, some of the harshness of the effects on everyday educational life, and some of the forms reflection takes regarding what might be possible in thinking about different kinds of futures.

Read as a whole, the articles in this *NORRAG Special Issue* illuminate how the states of emergency in education and international development are varied and complex across countries and different social groups. Although it is too early to tell if people and institutions will find a way through the political, economic and social challenges wrought by the pandemic, drawing on new educational perspectives and practices the chapters in this volume offer formative reflections that suggest key discursive and material changes are being put into place. State intervention is now discussed as needed to create public value, not correct market failures; this is a major shift from neoclassical economic orthodoxies that have reigned supreme in public policy for over forty years. Teachers are now seen as care-workers, essential for communities and society; the difference with previous descriptions of “deficit” is marked. Widespread vulnerabilities, such as mental health and poverty, are openly being discussed in education, with demands for collective action and care rather than individual blame. In putting together the chapters in this *NORRAG Special Issue*, we hope they will inspire people to turn these emerging ideas into good theory for practice, new lived experiences and fair institutions, mindful not to repeat the kinetic utopianism of modernity and silence the experiences of COVID-19 in education.

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