

Will the pandemic change schools?

Pasi Sahlberg

University of New South Wales, Sydney, Australia

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Abstract

Purpose – This essay offers a perspective for practitioners and decision-makers to look beyond short-term recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic and consider longer-term consequences that it may have on schools.

Design/methodology/approach – In this essay, I discuss some general observations about education during the pandemic and then provide a perspective to some issues related to educational inequalities and learning from home during the pandemic. The essay is informed by recent media articles and reports of national and international institutions.

Findings – This essay makes three claims: Despite high hopes, there is only a little chance schools will change as a consequence of this pandemic without bold and brave shifts in mindset in how that change happens. The COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated the effects of preexisting social and educational inequalities; fixing these would be an important consequence of the pandemic. During school closures, learning from home has been mostly based on the old logic of consuming information and knowledge rather than creating or cocreating new ideas and solutions to real-life problems.

Research limitations/implications – This is an essay that offers evidence-informed perspectives to current development in education, and it should not be treated as a research-based article.

Originality/value – This essay will contribute to the evolving public conversation and professional debate on the future of school education. It will be part of the series of essays that will support those who are seeking to not just adapt to meet the pandemic but also to step back and consider the medium to longer-term implications.

Keywords School change, Professionalism, COVID-19

Paper type Viewpoint

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I wrote this essay at the moment of time when most schools in North America were closed because of the COVID-19 pandemic. Students were forced to stay home and learn remotely using online education arrangements or other available means. At the same time, in many other parts of the world, children started to return to schools after several weeks of learning from home. This is noteworthy because neither I nor anybody else knows at the moment how school closures affect children's health and emotional well-being. We don't know whether they learning what they are expected to learn when they cannot go to school, or what schools should do when children are returning to school, to secure everyone's health and at the same time focus on student learning. Therefore, it is important to share perspectives from around the world on how teachers, school principals and thought leaders are responding to this crisis. My aim is to offer perspectives for practitioners and decision-makers to look beyond short-term recovery from this crisis and consider its longer-term consequences to teaching and learning in schools.

This essay and the long list of writings coming out from scholars and others will turn the volume up on what we have known for a very long time about what is wrong with our schools. Yet, the education policies and institutions simply do not change. There are those who see an opportunity in the COVID-19 crisis to reimagine education, but I don't see any indication that education systems would be able to renew themselves from within. What I want to argue in this essay is that there is only a little chance school education will change without bold and brave shifts in mindset in how that change happens. This includes, for example, a shift from one-size-for-all prescriptions for teaching and learning to flexible, diverse and self-directed ideas to diverse communities and a collective move from educating toward fixed, predictable outcomes to new, surprising ideas (knowledge or skills) as a result of creative and divergent learning. The role of policy in renewing education this way is probably much less than many of us think. This crisis is a good reminder that in transforming schools we should learn to rely



less on policy-driven reforms and more on successful ideas that have worked in various cultural settings and powerful networks that are spreading them without the mandate of the authorities.

Inequalities exposed

The scale of disruption to education caused by the COVID-19 pandemic is massive. UNESCO estimated that in April 2020 globally over 1.5*bn* children were not able to attend school because of measures to minimise the spread of the SARS-CoV-2. The UN Deputy Secretary-General Amina Mohammed said in the press conference in May that the COVID-19 pandemic is “exposing the frailties and inequalities of our societies” ([UN News, 2020](#)). OECD’s education chief [Schleicher \(2020\)](#) said that the COVID-19 pandemic “exposes the many inequities in our education systems – from the broadband and computers needed for online education, through the supportive environments needed to focus on learning, up to our failure to attract talented teachers to the most challenging classrooms.” It is important to note that the COVID-19 pandemic has not created any new inequalities, but it has certainly made existing ones more recognisable to many more of us.

Successful education systems perform well in excellence and equity of students’ learning outcomes. Australia, where I write this essay, is one of those education systems that has struggled to provide a fair go for all of its children at the time of this crisis. Children in Australia, according to the [OECD \(2018\)](#) and [UNICEF \(2018\)](#), do not have equal opportunities to good education. Disparities between affluent and disadvantaged communities in urban metro poles and lack of access to basic services and qualified personnel in remote parts of the country are also well reported. For a long time, political rhetoric has undermined these existing educational inequities that have over and over again been shown by domestic scholars and international comparisons. The assumption that all children have equal access to online learning from home “inherently privileges the wealthy and further entrenches a multitiered educational model” ([Graham and Sahlberg, 2020](#)). But this is something we knew already before this current pandemic.

Despite being one of the wealthiest countries in the world, not all Australians are living in a digital world with gadgets and Internet connections. According to recent data ([Watt, 2019](#)), just about 87% of Australians have access to the Internet at home meaning that over 2*m* people are partially or fully excluded from the daily benefits of the Internet. Furthermore, about 10% of five–14-year-old children who live in more affluent communities do not have access to the Internet compared to one-third of their peers who live in disadvantaged homes. Melbourne-based Mitchell Institute ([Noble, 2020](#)) estimates that up to one-third of lowest income households do not have access to the Internet at home, that presents a serious risk for children learning from those homes.

There is an additional factor now that negatively affects lives of millions of children. This current pandemic and its sudden impact on national economy has left in Australia over 600,000 people unemployed in April 2020, and as many have seen their working hours slashed ([Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2020](#)). This has brought extra stress and anxiety for thousands of families, and it often jeopardises parents’ efforts to support their children’s learning from home. Australian Academy of Sciences concluded that the educational outcomes for many vulnerable children will almost certainly go backwards. Particularly, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students are at risk and “likely to face particular challenges with remote learning related to lack of Internet service and device availability, reduced opportunities for interaction with Indigenous teacher assistants, and the challenge of incorporating culturally appropriate pedagogies into online resources”, the report states ([Australian Academy of Sciences, 2020](#)). The findings from Growing Up Digital Australia study ([Gonski Institute for Education, 2020](#)) confirm that Australian teachers and principals

recognise family poverty as a key factor in accessing technology that students need for learning even in prepandemic circumstances. That study shows that over 80% of teachers believe that students' socioeconomic background has an impact on their access to technology needed for learning. Moreover, one-third of teachers directly noticed that children living in poverty had less access to the internet-based technologies than their more affluent peers. All these things considered, I think we should have paid more attention to the current digital divide identified by Australian educators before expecting that all students are able to learn from home with digital devices and platforms.

In all countries, schools are different in terms of their readiness to support students' learning from home digitally. OECD's latest PISA survey showed that only 65% of 15-year old individuals in OECD countries, on average, attend schools where school principals consider that their teachers have the necessary technical and pedagogical skills to integrate digital devices in instruction (OECD, 2020). There is a considerable variation between socioeconomically advantaged and disadvantaged schools. In Australia, similar to OECD countries, on average, two-thirds of 15-year-old individuals are enrolled in schools where teachers are ready for integrating digital technologies in their teaching. But 80% of students who were in advantaged schools compared to just 50% of their peers in disadvantaged schools had teachers who were ready and able to integrate digital devices in teaching, that is one of the biggest gaps in all OECD countries.

The final verdict on the negative and positive consequences of the pandemic on Australian children has to wait for more systematic research and analysis. Early results from a large nationwide survey of 10,000 teachers in April reveal that 80% of teachers felt that they were not prepared for the transition from school-based teaching to remote online learning from home (Wilson *et al.*, 2020). Only quarter of teachers believed that their students were learning well in remote settings, and just 43% were confident that most of their students were positively engaged with learning from home. The silver lining in the COVID-19 pandemic is that in many countries it has become clearer now what serious negative implications educational inequalities can have on the quality of education and why it is important that we fix these inequalities as soon as possible.

Learning from home

What we know is that children's learning from home will be affected in different ways. No doubt this pandemic interrupts children's normal school-based education, but it does not mean that it would stop their learning. Some parents have wondered what might happen to children's learning when they are not at school. In order to make parents more stressed than they already are, researchers have calculated exactly the damage done by the period of remote learning from home. One study claimed that during the seven weeks that children were not able to go to school in New South Wales, disadvantaged students in year five have lost an average of 1.1 weeks of reading and 1.9 of mathematics, and in year nine they have been left behind 1.6 weeks in reading and 2.3 weeks in mathematics (Baker, 2020). Earlier this year, the international weekly newspaper Economist with circulation over 1.5m ran an article about the possible economic impacts of disrupted schooling: "If eight-year-olds' learning stops until September, they could lose nearly a year's maths attainment, according to first estimates". These speculations are based on an assumption that learning means measured student achievement of literacy and numeracy standards in the school. But learning is broader and deeper than that. Learning from home is an opportunity to learn more about yourself, for example, how to become more independent, self-directed and resilient as a learner – in short, learn how to learn. Too often we judge school learning by how much of knowledge and skills is consumed in school and give too little attention to what students have created as a result of learning. The truth is that learning actually never stops.

These speculations assume that students' test scores in numeracy and literacy are the only determinants of learning. These test scores do not tell us everything about what children have learnt. These scary economic estimates and speculations of how much children are behind the others when they go back to school just pour gasoline to the fears and stress of those who worry about children's future jeopardised for good by few weeks of school closures. The more troublesome assumption behind these false calculations is that children only learn when they are at school. Researchers and economists who are afraid that children's learning would stop if they are not at school should know better how existing educational inequalities that have been quietly accepted in most education systems are having a more severe and lifelong negative impact on learning of millions of children.

I am sure that for some children learning remotely from home has been little more than an inconvenience. For some others, however, this will certainly further magnify their learning disadvantage that is much more complicated than just literacy and numeracy. If the question is whether all children learnt all those things they should have learnt, the answer is certainly "no, they haven't". But, the answer to this question remains the same even if the school gates would have remained open. The cold fact is that children do not learn what they are taught at school anyway, and much of what they seem to learn they will soon forget. Therefore, parents and teachers should not be too much worried about students' possible learning gaps. More importantly, we should be interested in what children have done and learnt when schools have been closed and how social and physical distancing have affected their emotional and mental well-being. I think that parents and schools should not worry too much about how much teaching kids have missed when they were not at school and instead focus more on what they learned when they had more time to do their own things on their own pace. If we keep on asking how many weeks children will be left behind or how much their academics will suffer during school closures, we will miss much more important questions that should be explored: What have students learned when they have not been at school? Most likely, it will turn out that many children did not learn all those things that they would have learned had they been at school. It is equally possible that many students have learned something else instead that is important to them and can trigger further interest and curiosity to be more engaged in school when schools reopen. I bet many of us would be surprised about the latter.

Old lessons for new normal

Most education systems did not have much time to prepare for learning from home. Within a couple of weeks teachers had to change their teaching plans and schools had to set up new systems to enable their students to learn remotely from home. At the time of those preparations, nobody knew how long the disruption would last. Arranging learning from home temporarily for a few weeks is one thing, but preparing schools to do that for an uncertain period of time is more complicated. We did not know how the new virus would infect children, and more and often-conflicting information about the nature of the pandemic is reported around the world daily. Many politicians and government authorities adopted a crisis management strategy that relied heavily on medical experts' advice. In most countries, reopening schools to children was based on what virologists and health specialists said about the state of the pandemic. When the time came to consider recovery of closed services and businesses, economists and business leaders had a big influence in how that happened. In most countries, however, education professionals have had much smaller role in informing governments and their education authorities about how learning from home should be arranged and what children should learn when they are not able to come to school.

Hopefully, when this crisis is over politicians decide to continue to follow that same strategy and use more professional wisdom and evidence from education professionals to

inform the next education policies and school reforms. The transition from school-based teaching to remote learning from home did not happen in the same way in different countries. Countries where public administration is hierarchical often have rules and procedures that all schools had to follow. In these systems, responses to sudden changes like the one caused by the COVID-19 pandemic are often based on compliance with authorities' orders rather than collectively finding the best solutions to local challenges. Waiting for the decisions on what to do from central offices and making sure they are well understood by all often make planned actions slow.

Even when teachers had freedom to restructure their teaching, modify student assessments and adjust reporting requirements, learning from home was based on similar pedagogical logic than what it was at school. Students were expected to learn in the same pace and in the same ways regardless of where they were. The parents' role was to make sure that their children stayed on schedule and that they completed assigned tasks and homework on time. Based on some initial surveys and anecdotal evidence, it seems that learning from home has been for most parents a difficult, time-consuming and even frustrating experience. Especially, if parents believed that learning from home during school closures was the same as "home-schooling" that expects that parents are responsible for teaching and also learning at home. When compliance is the main *modus operandi* for teachers and schools, professionalism suffers. What many school leaders and teachers have been asking during these months is more trust in their professional judgment. Finland with its highly decentralised education system is an interesting example. Finnish schools that perform very well in international comparisons have a peculiar characteristic – just about half of 15-year-old individuals are enrolled in schools where, according to the principal, teachers are capable technically and pedagogically to use well digital devices in instruction (OECD, 2020). In this light, it would be risky to mandate all schools in the country to rearrange teaching in the same way. Instead, the government left the decisions regarding technical and practical issues to school districts (municipalities) and schools. Within rather broad national educational frameworks and health guidelines districts and schools were encouraged to find the best ways that would keep children learning and active while school premises were closed. This is one example of the high level of trust in teachers and school leaders that defines much of what happens in Finnish schools.

It is too early to say exactly how the global experiment of remote online learning during the school closures actually worked. No doubt there will be scores of research studies looking at this question during the coming months. Those who have been calling for an overhaul of an industrial model of schooling and suggested that we must reimagine schools have found the COVID-19 crisis as a perfect storm to remind us that there is no way back to the old model of school education. Bloggers, podcasters and social media activists are suggesting new directions for the postpandemic future. Abolishing standardized tests, addressing the importance of health and well-being of students and teachers and integrating blended learning models in schools are among those ideas that have received attention in recent conversations and debates around the world. It is true that recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic is an opportunity to rethink some of the outdated principles that define current school education around the world. For example, all children study at the same pace and the same things taught by one adult in a crowded space in school called classroom. Could teaching and learning in schools be organized so that students would study according to their own speed, style and even interests, more often than now? Or, should we recognize better what students learn outside school, for example, through hobbies? The power of that traditional model of education is so strong that even when it is completely disrupted by the current global crisis, most students experience learning from home the same way. What we can hopefully learn from this is that there are good alternatives to that traditional organisation of learning for children.

An important question is as follows: How can this social experiment help us to make bold and brave shifts in mindsets in how school systems would change? First, it is important to fix those inequalities in education that negatively affected many schools and students during the first wave of the COVID-19 pandemic. This requires much more than providing reliable Internet connection to all homes or making sure that all schools are ready to integrate technologies in their instruction whenever necessary. Governments need to understand that equity in education is one of the best investments to improve the nation's education and economic performance. Second, we should seek more advice from educators and trust teachers and principals about decisions on how to improve education, including how to organize teaching during school closures and what would be the best options for students for learning from home. Anecdotal evidence suggests that parents seem to trust more on teachers and schools than on education authorities in questions regarding what would be best for children when they cannot go to school. If this ever happens again, it is good to keep in mind that stress and fear that often come with crisis kill creativity and productivity. It is also true that autonomy kills stress and fear. A lesson for leaders is to loosen the grip on control and increase freedom.

No doubt research will soon reveal more lessons from these past few months of school closures and learning from home. We are likely to learn, for example, that teachers need to be better prepared to use emerging technologies and alternative pedagogical solutions in instruction. Schools need to be given facilities and technical support to use all possible tools that are available for teaching and learning in and out of school. Governments must make broadband connection a basic civil right to everyone regardless of their domicile or socioeconomic situation. And all students should be ready and able to take a lead of their own learning when a crisis interrupts learning at school.

This global social experiment that came unexpectedly with the COVID-19 pandemic has confirmed another truth we already knew. School systems all over the world are still primarily operating according to the logic of consumption rather than of creation. In other words, students learn, among many other things, that they should go to school to receive information and knowledge taught by their teachers and learn skills based on curriculum plans in which they had very little to say. Students learn to consume knowledge they are taught, follow curricula that is the same for all and accept that the number at the end of the term or semester is a valid judgment of their school performance. They learn to be compliant with all of these things at school. The more compliant you are as a student, the better you will do in the end. But when teaching is suddenly disrupted, consumption suffers, and these students are in trouble.

Compliance makes people wait for a sign, to act. People who feel that they are trusted to do right things regarding their own lives and who have learned to be self-directive, autonomous and creative learners are often more resilient and capable of using their practical instinct and professional wisdom to act when the rules of life change. I hope that the pandemic we are living with will help us to rethink the purpose of a school where children create new worlds as a result of learning. Children have an important part in making this change happen encouraged by courageous political leadership. How else can we reconcile the fact that in the middle of the current crisis the Prime Minister of New Zealand found time and deemed the tooth fairy and Easter bunny to be essential workers?

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Corresponding author

Pasi Sahlberg can be contacted at: Pasi.Sahlberg@unsw.edu.au