



# COVID-19 as a catalyst for educational change

Yong Zhao<sup>1,2</sup>

Published online: 11 June 2020  
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**Abstract** The massive damages of COVID-19 may be incalculable. But in the spirit of never wasting a good crisis, COVID-19 represents an opportunity to rethink education. The rethinking should not be about improving schooling, but should focus on the what, how, and where of learning. This article highlights some of the questions that schools can ask as they reimagine post-COVID education.

**Keywords** Education change · Crisis · Learning · COVID-19

The epidemic outbreak of the novel coronavirus (COVID-19) has disrupted virtually all aspects of human life, including the tragic loss of many lives around the globe. It has broken rhythms and routines, shattered patterns and norms, and exposed the best and worst of humanity and human institutions. Yet, even these great challenges and great difficulties offer opportunities to question time-honored norms and routines, so we may reimagine and recreate human institutions.

Among these institutions, schools are built to serve the purpose of education. COVID-19 has certainly disrupted the operations of millions of schools, often forcing their closure. While these closures have prompted innovation and institutional self-examination, the chance of large-scale, long-term changes is largely dependent on how we treat COVID-19 in education. If we treat COVID-19 as a short-term crisis, then whatever we do to help extend learning when schools are closed will be only temporary. As soon as schools are reopened, the status quo will be restored. This seems to be the mindset and behaviors of most schools around the world.

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✉ Yong Zhao  
yongzhaeducation@gmail.com

<sup>1</sup> Melbourne Graduate School of Education, University of Melbourne, Kwong Lee Dow Building, 234 Queensberry Street, Parkville, VIC 3053, Australia

<sup>2</sup> School of Education, University of Kansas, Lawrence, USA

Another approach is to treat COVID-19 as an opportunity for reimagining education. Schools are institutions for education, but they were built at a time when human understanding of learning and learners, knowledge and skills, as well as teaching and teachers was different from today. Back then, access to experts and expertise was drastically different, not to mention society and the economy.

Schooling has been criticized over the past hundred years. The criticism has grown even louder in recent years (Barber, Donnelly, and Rizvi 2012; Wagner 2008; Wagner and Dintersmith 2016). It seems apparent that schools have not been able to deliver what they are supposed to in today's world, let alone to prepare for tomorrow. However, even the reforms that have been promoted over the years have hardly touched the "grammar of schooling" (Tyack and Cuban 1995; Tyack and Tobin 1994) or the core business of schools.

The call for changing schools has never stopped. The efforts to bring changes to schools have never stopped either. But the present opportunity to completely re-imagine education is unprecedented. To avoid repeating the grammar of schooling, this process of re-imagination should be about creating the best education opportunities for all children, instead of about improving schools.

### **The opportunity: The pause in schooling**

Globally speaking, virtually all schools have been paused: some stopped temporarily for a few weeks, some for much longer. Individual schools have tried a variety of ways to ensure that schooling continues. Some replicated schooling using online tools; some tried to broadcast content to students; some gave out schoolwork without requiring all students to check in online; some tried to let students decide what they wished to do; and some enabled teachers to reorganize student learning.

Many of the traditional mechanisms for holding schools accountable have been paused as well. Most government-operated accountability testing has been removed for this year, as have school inspections by government agencies. Similarly, worldwide education entities such as IB, the College Board, and GCSE have suspended testing. Meanwhile, higher education, which many schools work to prepare students for, has also been paused, as have many accompanying entities that provide colleges the test scores for admissions.

These pauses give governments and education leaders the very rare opportunity to rethink education. If nothing else, governments can rethink whether they want to resume accountability testing, given that students have been over-tested and testing has itself become a pandemic in education (Emler, Zhao, Deng, Yin, and Wang 2019; Koretz 2017; Nichols and Berliner 2007). Testing providers, such as the IB and the College Board, can also reconsider whether to continue using the same modes of assessment. For colleges that have decided to not use test scores for admissions, this is also a great opportunity to consider if they should simply stop using test scores post-COVID-19.

More important, the pauses give schools a very rare and possibly very short window of opportunity to recreate educational institutions. This opportunity may vanish without much notice because as the threat of COVID-19 gradually disappears, schools will quickly return. The tendency will be to have them operate the same way as they were before.

## Possible areas of rethinking

Many areas of schooling in educational institutions can be and should be rethought. Roughly speaking, all education has to do with three areas of learning: what, how, and where. Learning from whom and when learning should take place are also important, but they can be discussed with the other three areas.

### What?

The “*what*” of learning has always been the curriculum prescribed by government agencies or bodies of authoritative individuals. Schools are typically the entities that implement an existing curriculum, make sure that students are exposed to and master the curriculum, and report that their students have done so to parents, colleges, the public, and whoever else wishes to know. To attend school is to experience what has been pre-determined. Students have very little say over what they learn in schools.

The practice of applying the same content for all students has been challenged for a long time, for two main reasons. First, the same content does not meet the needs of all students. Students typically are assigned the same content based on their age, but age does not determine their abilities. As a result, the content may be perfect for some but too hard or too easy for others. Second, not all students need or are interested in the curriculum. This reason is more complex than the first one because not everyone agrees that students need or should be interested in learning a differentiated curriculum. However, there is strong interest in providing students the opportunities to pursue their own interest and need (Zhao 2012, 2018a, 2018b).

Instead of continuing to force all students to study the same content, schools can invite their teachers to ask new questions. Do we need to teach exactly what we used to teach? Is it okay to allow students and teachers to discuss and negotiate what students want to learn? Can individual students be allowed to drop some courses and add new ones? Most importantly, can students be allowed to design their own learning?

### How?

Except for the more progressive and innovative schools, the *how* of learning has typically been directed by the teacher. The standard approach is that a teacher is assigned to a group of students and is responsible for ensuring that the students master the content. The students are the recipients of what the teacher teaches, and they do whatever the teacher asks them to do, both inside and outside the school.

This traditional way of learning has been challenged and criticized. One of the strong criticisms is the lack of purpose. Students are asked to recite, repeat, and remember meaningless knowledge, without any attempt to connect the knowledge to something in their lives. The knowledge is dry, distant, and irrelevant. The recent boom in Project-based Learning (PBL) and its various relatives is a clear sign that the traditional methods of learning need to change.

COVID-19 provides the right opportunity for all schools to try to change the how of learning. Teachers and schools could start with a few questions: do we need to teach all the time, given that so many online teaching resources are already available? Can we start learning by asking students to identify a problem they wish to solve and help them

find solutions to the problem? Is it possible for students to learn without us teaching them?

## Where?

The *where* of learning has been defined as a classroom in a school. By and large, learning is defined by what happens in a classroom and/or a special space at home. Schools have defined where learning can and should happen. Students have generally accepted that learning in school-defined places is learning, while whatever happens elsewhere is play or something else. But we know that learning can and does take place anywhere.

COVID-19 has changed the situation. When schools were closed and students were home, learning took place. Students took online courses and interacted with others online. In many ways, students fulfilled their obligations as students in schools. This should prompt schools to ask: does learning only take place in the classroom? If not, can students learn from other places, since online education means students can learn from anyone anywhere? If students learn from other sources, can they join programs offered by other schools or organizations?

## Summary

It is important to remember that the changes to the *what*, *how*, and *where* of learning discussed here are not new. However, they are necessary—not because of COVID-19 but to create a whole new world—the 4th Industrial Revolution. They are needed because we understand our learners and learning better. They are needed because we have drastically different ways to access knowledge and experts.

Many schools in the world have already been thinking about more innovative ways to deliver an education that is driven by students, that is more oriented toward purpose and meaning, and that is more global (e.g., Wehmeyer and Zhao 2020; Zhao, Emler, Snethen, and Yin 2019). I am hopeful that COVID-19, because of its disruptions to education, can inspire more schools to think of online education not as a lesser version of face-to-face education, but as a different way to organize education. I am also hopeful that this disruption can inspire school leaders to reimagine education in terms of today's context and tomorrow's needs. Most important, I am hopeful that we can rethink education from the perspectives of the children instead of the curriculum.

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**Yong Zhao (United States)** is a Foundation Distinguished Professor in the School of Education at the University of Kansas and a professor in Educational Leadership at the Melbourne Graduate School of Education. He previously served as the Presidential Chair, Associate Dean, and Director of the Institute for Global and Online Education in the College of Education, University of Oregon, where he was also a professor in the Department of Educational Measurement, Policy, and Leadership. Dr. Zhao has published more than 100 articles and 30 books. He has received numerous awards, including the Early Career Award from the American Educational Research Association, Outstanding Public Educator from Horace Mann League of USA, and Distinguished Achievement Award in Professional Development from the Association of Education Publishers. He is an elected fellow of the International Academy for Education and is recognized as one of the most influential education scholars.