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Contribution to the inaugural issue

Open Schooling: New Era, New Relevance, New Methods

by

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Abstract

The covid-19 pandemic is having a devastating impact on education systems, undoing years of progress towards the goal of having all children complete primary and secondary education. In the new post-covid-19 era, open schooling will be more relevant than ever, becoming a vital tool for repairing the damage done by the pandemic in poor and rich countries alike. Open schools are ready for the challenge. Their methods have matured greatly in recent years as they have taken advantage of new technologies to extend their reach, intensify their interactions with pupils and adapt their programmes to employment needs.

Introduction

It is a great pleasure to welcome the launch of the *International Journal for Open Schooling*. I congratulate the National Institute of Open Schooling, which I have long admired, and which has taught me much, on this happy initiative. Although I am a 50-year veteran of open and distance learning (ODL), my early involvement was primarily with open universities in Canada (TÉLUQ, Québec and Athabasca University, Alberta) and the UK (The Open University). I distilled this experience into my book, *Mega-Universities and Knowledge Media: Technology Strategies for Higher Education* (Daniel, 1996). It was not until I served as head of the Education Sector at UNESCO in the early 2000s that I appreciated fully the importance of open schooling. My principal task in those UNESCO years was to coordinate the efforts of international and national development agencies in implementing the campaign of Education for All (EFA).

The EFA campaign had been launched at a conference in Jomtien, Thailand in 1990 but made little headway during the turbulent decade that followed. To provide new impetus, a follow-up forum on EFA, held in Dakar, Senegal in 2000, charged UNESCO with driving faster progress. This event (World Education Forum, 2000) coincided with the UN's Millennium Declaration and the formulation of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) (United Nations, 2020). The EFA action plan agreed in Dakar had taken a broad view of education and training, including areas such as literacy and vocational training. However, UNESCO's partners in implementing this EFA action plan, notably the World Bank, believed that to make solid progress with the development funds available, the focus of effort should be narrowed and mapped to the MDGs.

Accordingly, through the decade of the 2000s, the EFA project concentrated on getting all children into and through primary school. This allowed national and international efforts to

be relatively successful, so that by 2015, the target date for the MDGs, all countries, except for Nigeria and Pakistan, could claim to have achieved Universal Primary Education, even if its quality was sometimes poor and completion was not always assured.

In 2004 I moved from UNESCO to the Commonwealth of Learning, where I reflected on the experience of coordinating the post-2000 EFA campaign in my book, *Mega-Schools, Technology and Teachers: Achieving Education for All*, (Daniel, 2010). It was clear that the success of the campaign for primary education had, by raising the expectations of parents, exacerbated the greater challenge of achieving universal secondary education. Already, at the turn of the millennium, an expert had commented that: 'without a sustained improvement in the coverage and quality of secondary education, developing countries will fall further behind relative to developed countries' (Watkins, 2000, p. 132). A few years later an estimate of the number of children between the ages of 12 and 17 not attending secondary school stood at 400 million (Binder, 2006). This figure remained at 258 million in 2019 (UNESCO, 2019, p. 1) and the UN estimates that in 2030 over 200 million children will still be out of school (United Nations, 2021).

This presents a huge challenge to many countries because secondary schooling is more costly than primary schooling. Lewin found that a country is unlikely to achieve universal secondary schooling if the unit cost of secondary is more than twice that of primary. In sub-Saharan Africa, for example, the disparity is usually much larger than this, with ratios of secondary to primary costs commonly between 3:1 and 6:1 (Lewin, 2008, p.66).

Open schooling is an important response to this challenge. It was natural that India, which had struggled to give all children primary education, let alone access to secondary schools, should pioneer a different approach. India's gross secondary school enrolment reached 50% in 2005, rose to 75% by 2014, but then stalled (GlobalEconomy.com, 2021). The country's Central Advisory Board for Education suggested that 15% of the secondary population be served by open schooling. India had established a National Open School as an autonomous organisation in 1989, renaming it the National Institute for Open Schooling (NIOS) in 2002. The NIOS is very successful, with 2.7 million pupils enrolled and 350,000 new ones admitted annually.

The NIOS has inspired the development of other open schools around the world and helped to train their staff and spread good practice by offering seminars. Much of this work has been facilitated by the Commonwealth of Learning (COL), which has a longstanding and effective programme of support for open schooling. According to COL's website:

'Open schooling is an effective response to the rapidly increasing demand for secondary education... It can provide skills for employment and entrepreneurship and can be conducted cost-effectively and at scale. Open schooling uses open, distance and online methods to scale up access to secondary schooling to reach the unreached. There is no single right way to offer open schooling, and COL works with ministries and institutions all over the Commonwealth to develop models of provision that are appropriate for context' (Commonwealth of Learning, 2021a).

An appendix to my book *Mega-Schools* included profiles of open schooling and open schools in nine countries (Daniel, 2010, pp. 107-140).

A new era

As a former senior officer of UNESCO responsible for the EFA programme, I look back with pride on its achievements and deeply regret that the covid-19 pandemic has reversed much of the progress we made. To quote the COL newsletter:

'While some progress has been made since 2015, many of the gains have been threatened by the pandemic. According to UNESCO, the 2020 learning losses equal the gains made in the last 20 years. Close to 59 million learners are still impacted by school closures, and covid-19 has disproportionately affected the most vulnerable and the marginalised. It is estimated that the number of school dropouts will increase, with 11 million girls not likely to return. Deficits in targeted support, Internet connectivity, accessible software and learning materials are likely to widen the gap for students with disabilities.' (Commonwealth of Learning, 2021b).

In his edited collection, *Primary and Secondary Education During Covid-19: Disruptions to Educational Opportunity During a Pandemic*, Reimers brought together contributions from 15 countries. His conclusions are also stark:

'The COVID-19 pandemic created an education crisis which robbed many students of the opportunities to learn what they were expected to and caused them to lose skills they had already gained. These losses were unequally distributed among different students and education systems and, as a result, if they are not reversed, the outcome of the pandemic will be increased educational inequality, from which economic and social inequality will follow. These will further complicate other social challenges, which predated the pandemic but were exacerbated by it: the challenge of increasing productivity, reducing poverty and inequality, increasing civic cohesion and trust in institutions and democratic governance, and addressing issues such as climate change or intra and interstate violence' (Reimers, 2022, p. 466).

New relevance

Open schooling was developed, in India and around the world, to address the glaring inequalities in access to education, particularly secondary schooling. Those inequalities, already considerable, have been greatly exacerbated by the covid-19 pandemic - and not only in poorer countries. Across the world there has been a strong correlation between the lengths of school closures and the economic circumstances of the pupils involved. Children from poorer families saw their schools closed for longer, and educational research has long established a solid correlation between the time that children spend in school and their learning gains. To make a bad picture even worse, the provision of emergency remote teaching, whether through technology or by adaptations of classroom lessons, was much greater in richer countries and in the wealthier neighbourhoods of poorer countries (Daniel, 2020).

As UNESCO comments:

'One year into the COVID-19 pandemic, close to half the world's students are still affected by partial or full school closures, and over 100 million additional children will fall below the minimum proficiency level in reading because of the health crisis. Prioritizing education recovery is crucial to avoid a generational catastrophe...' (UNESCO, 2021).

Unfortunately, the agenda of a ministerial meeting convened to discuss the way forward did not refer directly to the use of open schooling. Although it is easy to blame this on the historically low status of all forms of open and distance learning, those in governments and the open schooling movement must take some of the blame. This is the time, as never before, for the open schooling community to be robust in presenting the cost advantages and greater effectiveness of open schooling.

Fortunately, however, there are some signs that the tide is turning. An important factor in changing attitudes has been the use of technology in open schooling systems.

New methods

The methods of open and distance learning (ODL) have evolved in step with the development of newer technologies, with the vital caveat that these technologies must be accessible to learners if they are to make effective use of them. In the 19th century, for example, the development of railways made possible the introduction of national postal systems. Once these systems achieved universal coverage, correspondence education was born and enabled millions of people to continue their education and training from their homes.

The last two decades have seen the rapid development of internet-based technologies and their application to ODL. In open schools this has usually begun with their use in administrative functions. After the NIOS introduced online registration in 2007, 30% of its pupils were enrolling online within two years (Daniel, 2010, p. 57). Since that time the proportion of the world's population with access to the internet through digital devices has increased steadily.

In applying more technology to their teaching and learning operations, however, open schools should reflect on the experience of conventional schools that attempted emergency remote teaching in response to the pandemic. As a broad generalisation, moving classes online worked tolerably well for children in the upper years of secondary school but was not successful for younger pupils. Even making allowances for the speed at which schools had to implement emergency remote teaching, its effectiveness depended too much on household wealth and the abilities of parents to substitute themselves for teachers (Daniel, 2020; 2022).

Fortunately, open schools already address the needs of remote pupils for human contact and support. India's NIOS has a network of over 6,000 study centres for its academic (3,530), vocational (1,379) and basic (1,313) programmes. These are called 'accredited institutions' and mostly run by partner bodies that also support the pupils in other ways. The richness of the digital infrastructure in these study centres has improved steadily in recent years.

Other articles in this issue have more to say about the extra value that technology can bring to open schooling. Nevertheless, the strength of open schooling will always lie in the integration of digital approaches with face-to-face support by dedicated teachers.

Just as important as the effective deployment of technology is mapping the curricula taught by open schools onto nationally and internationally agreed priorities, such as those expressed in Goal 4 of the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) (United Nations, 2021). This goal enjoins member states to 'ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and to promote lifelong learning opportunities for all'. Target 4.4 is of special relevance to open

schools: 'By 2030, substantially increase the number of youth and adults who have relevant skills, including technical and vocational skills, for employment, decent jobs and entrepreneurship'.

Other open schools are already following the example of NIOS in emphasising vocational education and training for employment, which have become important criteria for judging the quality of education systems generally. According to COL:

'Quality is now evaluated on the anvil of employability. Employability, of course, is highly dependent on the market opportunities available to qualified individuals. In recent years, the rapidly evolving nature of the workplace is requiring that people become lifelong learners to remain employable. One thread seems to be common to all endeavours: no work stream is exempt from digitalisation, and the pandemic has accelerated this transformation. It is serendipitous that most interventions in educational systems triggered by the pandemic have been digital in nature, which will help to equip students with the necessary skills for the future of work' (Commonwealth of Learning, 2021b).

Conclusion

It has taken too long for the global community to understand the significant response that open schooling can make to the huge educational challenges of our times. It took a devastating pandemic, which has reversed years of progress in improving schooling, to bring the challenges of educational inequality to centre stage. The goal of open schooling is to reduce inequality by providing opportunities for education and training to the disadvantaged, whatever their circumstances and wherever they may be.

Open schooling should not be seen as a technological fix to the challenge of inequality, although it draws on technology to bridge gaps of distance and wealth. Rather, it should be conceived as a key component in a set of 21st century educational ecosystems (Daniel, 2010, p. 102). These would bring together governments, communities, and conventional school systems. Open schools, with their networks of learning centres, would link these together to enable their societies to address a crucial existential issue and avoid a generational catastrophe.

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