

Open Schooling: The Key to Repairing the Damage of Covid-19 to Children's Education

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Article submitted to the
Journal of Open Learning and Research Communication

Abstract

Because of the worldwide school closures that it has caused, covid-19 has done immense damage to children's education; reversing 20 years of progress towards the international goal of having all children complete primary and secondary schooling. We outline the story of the Education for All (EFA) campaign that began with a conference in Jomtien, Thailand, in 1990, and accelerated after a follow-up forum in Dakar, Senegal, in 2000. From then until 2015 the EFA campaign focussed on the Millennium Development Goal of Universal Primary Education, and achieved considerable success.

Covid-19 has reversed much of this progress because many jurisdictions closed their school systems for extensive periods during the pandemic without offering adequate substitutes. Attempts at emergency remote teaching were not successful in the world's school systems, although they worked adequately in tertiary education in rich countries.

Without determined efforts to remedy this disaster, economic and social inequalities will now be exacerbated in most countries. Open education will be an important mechanism to counter these losses. We focus particularly on the relevance of the open schooling to this challenge and note that in tertiary education the existing network of open universities has the potential to absorb many more students at low cost.

Keywords:

COVID-19; Millennium Development Goals (MDGs); Education for All (EFA); Tertiary Education; K-12 Education; Open Schooling; Emergency Remote Teaching (ERT); Open/Distance/Digital Learning

Introduction

This article is in three parts. First, we recall the global campaign to achieve Education for All (EFA) that gathered momentum from its inception in 1990 to the outbreak of covid-19 in 2020. Second, we report on the disruption that the pandemic has wrought in education at all levels, undoing years of progress in the EFA campaign and exacerbating cultural, economic, and social inequalities. Finally, we suggest how countries and institutions can use open education, particularly open schooling, to repair the depredations of covid-19.

Education for All

Over 70 years ago, the nations of the world, speaking through the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, asserted that “everyone has a right to education”. The process of decolonisation began soon afterwards and newly independent countries set to work with a will to build their own national infrastructures and services, not least in education. In subsequent years, however, many encountered daunting problems: notably mounting debt burdens, economic stagnation, rapid population growth, widening economic disparities, war, occupation, civil strife, the preventable deaths of millions of children and widespread environmental degradation. These problems constrained their efforts to meet basic schooling needs, and, in turn, the poor education of their populations prevented them from addressing these various challenges with strength and purpose. This caused major setbacks in providing schooling in the 1980s in less developed countries, while in some industrialised countries cuts in government expenditure over that decade also led to the deterioration of children's schooling.

By 1990 however, with the Cold War ending, there seemed to be genuine progress toward peaceful detente and greater cooperation among nations. Moreover, the essential rights and capacities of women were being acknowledged. The international community believed that these forces, combined with the cumulative experience of reform and educational progress in many countries, made the goal of basic education for all an attainable goal for the first time in history. A campaign to achieve Education for All (EFA) was launched at a conference in Jomtien, Thailand, in that year. Its goal was that: 'Every person - child, youth and adult - shall be able to benefit from educational opportunities designed to meet their basic learning needs' (UNESCO, 1990).

But the 1990s were also a turbulent decade. The EFA campaign made little headway until a follow-up forum, held in Dakar, Senegal in 2000, charged UNESCO with developing an action plan and driving faster progress (World Education Forum, 2000). As a senior officer at UNESCO at the time, I was charged with coordinating the efforts of national and international development actors to implement EFA. The Dakar plan took a broad view of education, including areas such as literacy and vocational training. Its approval coincided with the UN's Millennium Declaration and the formulation of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) (United Nations, 2020).

UNESCO's partners in implementing the EFA plan, notably the World Bank, urged that the focus of effort be narrowed and mapped to the MDGs, to allow greater progress with the limited development funds available. Accordingly, through the decade of the 2000s, the EFA project concentrated on getting all children into and through primary school. This made for a relatively successful campaign, and by 2015, the target date for the MDGs, all countries, except Nigeria and Pakistan, could claim to have achieved Universal Primary Education, even if the quality was often poor and many children did not complete the course.

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). By then 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. An expert had already 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 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).

Nevertheless, countries tried to rise to this challenge during the decade of the 2010s. 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.

The impact of Covid-19

An article on its impact published early in the pandemic called covid-19 'the greatest challenge that these expanded national education systems have ever faced' (Daniel, 2020).

To quote *Connections*, the Commonwealth of Learning 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).

The damage is not restricted to poorer countries. Reports on the response of US school systems to the covid-19 pandemic argue that 'America resorted to remote learning against pupils' interests', and comment that 'America has failed to learn from the safe opening of classrooms abroad' (The Economist, 2022).

Repairing the damage

Such assessments of the damage that covid-19 has wreaked on education systems led UNESCO to comment: 'prioritizing education recovery is crucial to avoid a generational catastrophe' (UNESCO, 2021). How can the world make this a priority?

The focus must be on K-12 education (schooling). Tertiary education coped fairly well with the pandemic, pivoting easily between classroom instruction and emergency remote teaching. Even first-year students were relatively satisfied with these arrangements (see e.g., Daniel, 2021). The real problem is that tertiary education leaders have recently devoted their energies to corrupting and futile efforts to boost their institutions' global rankings. In the words of a veteran researcher: 'At the end of nearly 20 years of rankings, there is little evidence that rankings make any meaningful impact on improving quality. And there is no correlation between rising in the rankings and making a significant contribution to society or the public good' (Hazelcorn & Mihut, 2022). Yet tens of millions of extra enrolments in tertiary education are expected in the next 20 years as people's aspirations grow. Higher education systems must focus on meeting these needs if they wish to align with the public good. The existing global network of open universities, for example, which already counts millions of students, can expand at low cost to accept many more (Daniel, 1996).

Recovering lost schooling is a tougher challenge because very large numbers of people need it now and many are hard to reach. There were already over 250 million youngsters not receiving any secondary education before the pandemic hit. Moreover, many children who were in school were learning little: half of all ten-year-old children in low- and middle-income countries were unable to read and understand a simple age-appropriate text. Tens of millions who were in school before the pandemic are likely to have dropped out, because of school closures, at huge economic and social cost to them and their countries. According to the World Bank (2021) and its partners: 'this generation of students now risks losing \$17 trillion in lifetime earnings in present value, or about 14 percent of today's global GDP, because of COVID-19 pandemic-related school closures'.

Although the World Bank report focuses on reopening schools and notes the potential of online learning, boosting conventional approaches to schooling will only scratch the surface of the problem. The model of open schooling, pioneered by India and already operational in various lower-income countries, holds more promise for two reasons. It can be implemented at scale and usually involves many socio-economic partners to create an eco-system that supports marginalised learners in a holistic way (Daniel, 2010; 2022a; 2022b).

India established a National Open School as an autonomous organisation in 1989, renaming it the National Institute for Open Schooling (NIOS) in 2002. It is now 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 and helped to train their staff and spread good practice. This work has been facilitated by the Commonwealth of Learning (COL), which has a longstanding 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).

Daniel (2010, pp. 107-140) provides profiles of open schools in eight countries (Botswana, Canada, France, India, Indonesia, Mexico, Namibia, and Papua New Guinea). In general, these open schools offer a combination of distance/online learning and face-to-face sessions in local study centres, which are often run by organisations dedicated to other aspects of children's welfare. These study centres answer 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. They are called 'accredited institutions' and usually 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.

Conclusion

The covid-19 pandemic has caused worldwide disruption. Its overall impact was to exacerbate existing inequalities among people and among countries. Disruptions to education, most particularly school closures, will leave lasting damage unless effective recovery strategies are undertaken quickly. After covid-19 recedes, governments will face the difficult challenge of balancing public finances while responding to demands for special support from many sectors of society. This requires approaches to educational recovery that are more cost-effective than traditional schooling and can be implemented at scale without requiring new infrastructure. Open schooling, which combines centrally organised teaching and local centres that cater to the diverse needs of children whose lives have been blighted by the pandemic, is the most cost-effective strategy for addressing the challenge. It can be implemented rapidly and allows local community organisations to contribute to the recovery process in a coordinated manner.

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