Education in Crisis

A SOPHIA One-sheet by Eric Thomas Weber

The COVID-19 pandemic prompted nations around the world to make sudden and radical changes to schooling practices in the spring of 2020. For a generation prior to the pandemic, scholars and critics of all stripes have proclaimed a variety of crises in education, from questions of whether students are learning anything and are being "left behind" to concerns over inequality and inadequacy of school funding. In 2020, the health crisis saw kids returned home without plans for how parents and guardians would care for their children and the economic effects of the virus and quarantining practices put many people out of work. There have emerged two narratives of crisis in education, then, one long-standing concern over how best to educate people and another about education in times of crisis.

Part I: Education in Time of Crisis

The pressures resulting from COVID-19 presented a sudden crisis in the spring of 2020 and pressures to find solutions to problems in the summer, prior to the new school year in the fall. Immediate problems included lack of childcare and, for many, the loss of the provision of two meals each day that students were offered for free or reduced prices in school. The summer of 2020 presented a high pressure moment in which school leaders had to consider a remarkable variety of challenges and questions to be answered about how schooling might recommence in the fall, with social distancing, many teachers of especially vulnerable ages with respect to the pandemic, and challenges for shifting schooling that had been in person to online platforms. Political leaders in many states in the U.S. were in denial and conflict over the risks and rules about wearing masks. Students at all levels were affected and inequalities of access and resources abounded, such as in the availability of computers, sufficiently robust internet infrastructure, tools for accessing such platforms, and the supervision of young children with no experience on computers. In addition, the many students who receive special education or therapies while at school saw radical changes to availability of needed services.

Questions for Part I:

1) What challenges for education in the time of the COVID-19 pandemic were the greatest, whether mentioned above or not?

2) If the world were to experience another pandemic, how could societies better prepare for the needs of childcare for employed parents?

3) The pandemic has aggravated problems for many people but has also required experiments in education that would not have been attempted under normal conditions. Have there been any valuable innovations worth preserving, moving forward?

4) Parents before the pandemic raised concerns over "screen time." Has the pandemic revealed the need for every child to have an affordable, working computer? Why or why not? How do we think about screen time today?

5) Should broadband internet be considered a basic utility, like water and electricity? Should all people be provided access at affordable rates? Why or why not?

6) What aspects of education in a time of crisis aggravate inequalities and what can be done to ensure greater equality of opportunity in response?

Part II: Enduring Crises in Education

Educational historian Diane Ravitch argued in *Reign of Error* that many of the claims about educational crises prior to the pandemic are based on misunderstandings of available data about education. She notes that inequalities on the basis of race and economic status are real and ought to be addressed, but claims that students overall aren't learning to read or are falling behind in the world misread the relevant data and are manipulations motivated to promote the privatization of schools. Much attention in schools has been focused on standardized testing, which has become the tail that wags the dog, driving and minimizing educational curricula in the name of accountability.

Educational theorists note at least three purposes of education that are most commonly advanced: i) the goal of enabling personal fulfillment; ii) the development of good citizens; and iii) preparation for careers and jobs. Arguments about educational systems today worry that the thinning of curricula to concentrate on standardized tests has led schools to focus on basic skills, and politicians tend to emphasize career preparation over other goals.

In his *Ethics*, Aristotle argued that it is a mistake to expect more specificity concerning a subject matter than the subject matter allows. Since a whole industry has emerged for the sake of standardization, financial motives are entwined and contribute to lobbying for the accountability movement. Educational thinkers like John Dewey argued in his day that it is a mistake to focus too much on accountability, in part because we are expecting too much specificity, but also because people vary greatly and part of the value of democracy is found in individuals' differences from one another.

Questions for Part II:

1) What are the most important purposes of public education and to what extent are schools today focused upon them?

2) Accountability is a desirable expectation for matters of social responsibility. Does the push for accountability go too far? If so, how so? If not, should expectations be raised? How and why?

3) Ravitch notes that the "achievement gap" between white students and students of color is diminishing, but persists, and is especially associated with poverty. Are people more willing to fund and work on change to educational policy than to the task of trying to diminish or eliminate poverty? If so, why? If not, then how can educational reformers best attend to the problems of poverty for the sake of improving schooling?

4) The saying goes that "the rising tide lifts all boats," yet parents feel motivated most about the well-being of their own children. In addition, when people want the best for their families, they sometimes see that goal as contrary to the good of others, as though opportunities are a zero-sum game. Does everyone benefit when all people have access to a quality education, or should we want good schools for our families and inferior schools for others? How do related disagreements affect educational policy?

5) It seems like a good idea to have standards for many things, such that we ensure that our kids have good teachers. At the same time, standardization benefits those people who are best suited for a chosen standard, harming those less well suited for it. What is the difference between standards and standardization? Are they both good things? Neither? Is one good and the other problematic? Why?

6) How can we have a sense of students' academic achievement without standardized testing? Would such a change be desirable?