

Chapter 9:

Covid-19 Disruption of Schooling and Radical Reform in Education

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A pandemic is a terrible thing. By definition, it causes massive illness and death. It also causes economic devastation for many, and it exacerbates social inequality, as those who are poor to begin with suffer more than the rich. This is true of past pandemics as well as the current Covid-19 pandemic. But pandemics can also have silver linings, as they can shake people out of old ways of thinking and doing and set the course for new, improved ways. For example, historians have contended that the 14th century Black Death pandemic disrupted stagnant medieval beliefs, catalysed large-scale social reforms, and helped bring on the Renaissance period of renewed humanism and interest in learning (Griffin & Denholm, 2020). More recently, and on a shorter time scale, the HIV/AIDS pandemic, which began in the 1980s, brought many gays out of the closet, which led many people, of all political and religious persuasions, to realise that some of their dear friends and relatives were gay, which may thereby have prompted the subsequent rapid revolution in social acceptance of gays and lesbians.

Might there be a silver lining to the present Covid-19 pandemic in the realm of education? That is the question of this chapter. To begin I must distinguish between two terms that appear in the chapter's title, *schooling* and *education*. These are commonly used as

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synonyms, but in my lexicon they are not. *Schooling*, as I use the term, refers to sets of procedures employed by specialists, called teachers, to induce people, called students, to acquire a specified set of skills, knowledge, values, beliefs, and/or ideas, referred to as a curriculum. *Education*, as I use the term, refers to a much broader concept. It can be defined as everything a person learns that helps that person to live a satisfying, meaningful, and moral life. By this definition, education does not include everything a person learns, but includes everything a person learns that is, in the long run, helpful to that person and to the society in which the person lives. Most of education, by this definition, occurs outside of schooling. Schooling can contribute to a person's education, but it can also detract from it.

I've divided this chapter into four sections. The first describes harmful effects of our standard system of schooling that were occurring prior to the pandemic. The second describes how children and parents coped with the immediate effects of the pandemic. The third describes how the pandemic influenced families' thinking and planning relevant to their children's education. And the fourth presents a vision for the future of education, which might be hastened by effects of the pandemic.

Pre-Covid-19 problems with compulsory schooling

In the first period of the Covid-19 pandemic, with schooling disrupted, people talked about "normal" schooling as that which was occurring before the pandemic. But that "normal" was not healthy and would not have been seen as normal decades earlier. The data I summarise here pertain to the United States, but much the same is true throughout much of the world.

Over the decades, from roughly 1960 to 2020, the amount of children's time consumed by schooling increased greatly. The increase was gradual, slow enough not to be noticed from year to year, but over the 60-year period it was huge. The average length of the school year in the United States increased by 5 full weeks, and the average length of the school day increased from 6 hours to closer to 7 (Column Five, 2020). But the biggest changes were in curriculum

and homework. Recesses for elementary students were reduced or even eliminated, lunch hour became much less than an hour and was increasingly regimented, and art and music classes and creative activities in other classes were reduced or eliminated, all to permit more time to drill for the ever-growing number of standardised tests. Homework was greatly increased and began to be demanded even of kindergarten children. One study revealed that the average amount of time that schoolchildren, all grades combined, spent at school plus schoolwork at home increased by 7.5 hours per week just between 1981 and 2003, which is the equivalent of adding nearly an entire adult workday to children's weekly schoolwork (Juster et al., 2004).

By the beginning of the twentieth century, many children were spending more time at schoolwork than their parents were at full-time jobs. Children who could not adapt to all this micromanaged, often boring, sedentary activity were increasingly labelled as having one or more mental disorders, with ADHD being the most common. Children's time outside of schoolwork also became increasingly adult-controlled and school-like. Where children once roamed and played freely outdoors, they now were commonly carted from one adult-controlled sport or other adult-managed activity to another. There is no evidence that this extra schoolwork, adult regulation, and pressure increased real learning, learning that lasts beyond the next test, but there is lots of evidence that it had profound negative effects on children's mental health.

Analyses of standardised clinical questionnaires, given in unchanged form to normative groups of young people over the decades, revealed that the rates of what today would be called Major Depressive Disorder and Generalised Anxiety Disorder among adolescents increased roughly 5- to 8-fold between the 1950s and the year 2000 (Gray, 2011; Twenge et al., 2010), and other measures indicate that young people's anxiety and depression have continued to increase since then. Data collected by the US Centers for Disease Control reveal that the suicide rate for children under age 15 increased by 6-fold between the 1950s and the second decade of the twenty-first century. Other research reveals a continuous decline in young people's sense of control over their own lives over this same period,

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as assessed by a standard measure of locus of control (Twenge et al., 2004). And still other research reveals a continuous and overall large decline in creative thinking, as assessed by the well-validated Torrance Tests of Creative Thinking, among schoolchildren at all grade levels, at least from the mid 1980s through the first decade of the twenty-first century (Kim, 2011). None of these findings should surprise us. Take away free play and time for creative activities, reduce children's opportunities to control their own lives, and increase the stress of schooling and what do you get? Depression, anxiety, loss of internal locus of control, and decline in creativity.

Evidence for the role of schooling in the declining mental health of young people comes not just from correlations over decades, but also from correlations within the calendar year. A study published under the title *Stress in America* by the American Psychological Association (2014), found that teenagers in school were the most stressed-out people in the United States and that 83% of them attributed their stress at least partly if not fully to school. No other source of stress was mentioned anywhere nearly as often. Moreover, when the survey was conducted during summer vacation from school, the percentage reporting severe stress was half of that found when school was in session. Other research reveals that, for young people of school age, but for nobody else, the rates of emergency mental health admissions, attempted suicides, and actual suicides are roughly twice as high during weeks when school is in session compared to when school is not in session (Hansen & Lang, 2011; Lueck et al., 2015; Plemmons et al., 2018). A study of hundreds of middle-school children from many different school districts, which involved reporting on their moods at random times when a beeper went off, revealed that school was where the children were least often happy (Csikszentmihalyi & Hunter, 2003). In similar study with high-school students, 75% of the reports in school were of negative feelings, the most common of which were *tired*, *stressed*, and *bored* (Moeller et al., 2020).

Children and teens coped remarkably well with the first Covid-19 lockdown

Most schools in the United States closed, because of the pandemic, around the middle of March of 2020, as did most sporting programmes and other formal after-school and Covid weekend activities for children. Almost immediately, dire predictions appeared in the popular media about the harmful consequences that school closure would have for children and families. Without the structure of school and other adult-directed activities, what would children do? How could parents deal with bored, restless children at home all day? What would happen to children's minds and bodies? Would they just vegetate?

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To address such questions, the nonprofit organisation Let Grow conducted a survey of parents and school-aged children in April of 2020, about a month after most schools closed, and then repeated the survey, with a new sample of participants, in May (Gray, 2020). The survey samples came from a demographically representative list of people in the United States willing to fill out survey forms, maintained by a market research company. In each month, 800 parents of children from age 8 through 13 and 800 children in that age range were surveyed. The results revealed that, all in all, families were coping very well, in some ways better than they had before schools closed. For example, approximately 50% of the children, both months, reported that they were "more calm" since the pandemic than they had been before, and the remainder were roughly evenly split between "less calm" and about the same as before. Likewise, many more parents, both months, reported that their children were "less stressed" after schools closed than reported the opposite.

The surveys also revealed that the children were getting more sleep than before. Most were doing school-imposed distance lessons at home, but a question about this revealed that, on average, it took only 3 hours per school day to complete them. This reduction in school time, combined with the closure of after-school programs, provided children with much free time. The survey indicated that most children were using that time productively to pursue activities

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that they did not have time for before. Among those frequently mentioned, by the parents in response to an open-ended question, were learning to ride a bicycle, exploring nature, reading for pleasure, learning new games, drawing or painting, knitting or other crafts, learning to play a musical instrument, starting to learn a new language, cooking, doing laundry, and engaging younger siblings in constructive ways. Many parents seemed to discover, for the first time, that their children thrived when they were not kept constantly busy with adult-imposed activities. In April, 73% of the parents agreed with the statement, “I am gaining a new appreciation of my child’s capabilities,” and only 5% disagreed (the rest were neutral). Also, in both months, most parents reported that conflicts between them and their child had *decreased* since the pandemic. A possible explanation for this is that many conflicts, prior to the pandemic, had to do with school and school-like activities—getting the kids up for school, getting them to do their homework, getting them to their various after-school activities, and dealing with children’s frustrations about school.

At least two other surveys, one in the UK (Widnall et al., 2020) and one by the Wheatly Institute in the US (Twenge et al., 2020), have likewise shown that students’ mental health improved during the school lockdown in the spring and early summer of 2020. The UK study showed a reduction in anxiety and the Wheatly study showed a reduction in depression. None of this is to suggest that children and teens were oblivious to the negative, frightening effects of the pandemic. The UK study revealed that they were quite concerned about the disease and the economic devastation, especially when these were affecting their own family or people they knew. Yet, overall, effects of these concerns on their mental health were apparently outweighed by the benefits of free time, family time, sleeping time, time to pursue their own interests, and the temporary reduction in the demands of school. For some families, at least, this observation has been a wakeup call.

Effects of the pandemic on families' schooling plans: homeschooling, pods, & microschools

Prior to the pandemic, a small but ever-growing number of families were removing their children from public schools for homeschooling. According to surveys conducted by the United States Department of Education, the percentage of school-aged children who were homeschooling increased from 1.7% in 2000 to 3.3% in 2016 (Snyder et al., 2019), and a Gallop Poll in August, 2019, estimated that 5% would be homeschooling that fall. A year later, in August of 2020, the summer of the pandemic, a repeat Gallop Poll, with the same questions, revealed a sudden doubling of those planning to homeschool—up to 10%. What had been a gradual upward slope became a spike. The poll was clear in identifying homeschooling as “not enrolled in a formal school but taught at home.” Online learning, at home, while enrolled at a school, was not counted as homeschooling.

One reason for the homeschooling surge, no doubt, had to do with uncertainty as to when and how public schools would reopen. Plans kept changing as Covid-19 cases in any given city or state fell or rose. Would school be entirely remote, with teachers in control but the children home on their computers? Or would students go to school, either every day or some days, with varying uncertain measures to reduce the risk of Covid-19? Such uncertainty led many families to see homeschooling as a better option, because it would allow them to settle on a definite plan that they could control.

For some, however, the decision to homeschool was also stimulated by the parents' observations of how well their children were faring outside of school. They saw the reduced stress and increased self-initiative in their children and began to value the increased family freedom that came with release from school schedules. Some parents reported that seeing the lessons the school was presenting to their children over the internet contributed to their decision to homeschool. Some saw how arbitrary and boring the lessons were and felt encouraged that the family could develop a more meaningful curriculum, with the aid of the internet and other

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resources. Some, impressed by how well their children learned on their own initiative, chose not just to homeschool, but to homeschool by the method commonly called unschooling, in which there is no imposed curriculum and children learn by pursuing their own interests. Here is what one mother wrote, in a blog comment, regarding this decision:

“I have 4 kids who have always been in the public-school system, and we felt a lot of stress about school over the years. Over the summer I joined a homeschooling Facebook group to learn more about homeschooling ‘just in case’ virtual school didn’t work out. A couple weeks into the virtual school year, and I knew it wasn’t going to work for my kids. I had quit my part-time job to help my kids with school, and I felt like the virtual program was wasting our time and adding layers of stress and boredom. I heard about unschooling on the Facebook group, and I decided to learn more... [The books I read] really opened my eyes to the problems imposed by the American public-school system and the possibility of real joy and ease through self-directed learning. We are now 3 weeks into unschooling. Playing, talking, exploring, reading, baking, video gaming, hiking, relaxing, and really enjoying each other with no schoolwork power struggles or stress. Covid-19 is horrible, but I am grateful that it has forced me to really stop and think and find a better way for my family.”

With more homeschoolers come increased opportunities for homeschooling families to join together and form educational co-ops, microschools, or learning pods, which bring children together for joint learning and recreational opportunities. This trend had preceded the pandemic but spiked in the fall of 2020. Such cooperation among homeschooling families not only enriches the children’s experiences, but also enables parents to share the tasks of facilitating the children’s education, or, in some cases, to pool their money and hire a teacher or facilitator. These learning groups can rise quickly, can meet in living rooms or community spaces, and can be low cost or even no cost. Across the US, thousands of such learning groups were formed near the beginning of the 2020-2021 school year (Ark, 2020). It seems unlikely that this trend will reverse itself once the pandemic is over. Families that discover the increased

learning flexibility, decreased stress, and increased control over their own schedules that comes with these alternatives to conventional schooling will have little incentive to turn back.

All this illustrates, for the Covid-19 pandemic, the kind of phenomenon that has been reported to occur in past pandemics. Ongoing, overarching systems break down, which leads people who had not done so before to take matters into their own hands. Sometimes what they come up with is better than what had been normative before.

A vision for the future of education

Of course, I have no crystal ball, and some might attribute the vision I describe here to wishful thinking more than to prognosticating power. However, even before the pandemic, movements toward what I describe here were beginning to occur, and these now appear to be accelerating. In brief, I envision a rational system of education, which meets the needs of our time and would be available to all, that operates in three phases over the duration of childhood and youth. The first phase involves learning about yourself, your interests, and the world around you; the second involves exploring possible career paths; and the third involves specialised professional training and certification for careers that legitimately require them. In what follows I elaborate a bit on each of these and comment on the degree to which they are already emerging. Their emergence is not the result of top-down dictates but is driven bottom-up by those who opt out of current ways and develop new ones.

Phase I: Learning about one's world, one's self, and how the two fit together

In this vision, the first 15 to 18 years of one's life are years of self-governed play and exploration, by which learners make sense of the world around them, try out various ways of being in that world, discover and pursue activities that most interest them, and create a tentative plan about how they might support themselves as

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independent adults. This is what happens already for the growing number of young people whose families have opted for *Self-Directed Education*, whether through home-based unschooling or enrollment in a school or learning center designed to support autonomous learning. (Note: consistent with the terminology developed by the Alliance for Self-Directed Education, I capitalise Self-Directed Education when it refers to the deliberate practice of opting out of coercive schooling and taking responsibility for one's own education.) In my book *Free to Learn* and in various academic articles, I have described how children are biologically designed to educate themselves through exploring, playing, and pursuing their own interests and have summarised research evidence that people who took this approach are doing very well in adulthood (Gray, 2013, 2016, 2017).

Self-Directed Education has never been easier to pursue than it is today—because of increasing social acceptance of it and technology that makes information readily available—and it will continue to get even easier. We also now live in a world where the rote procedures and memorised knowledge taught in schools are less useful than they were in the past. We now have robots to do rote work and search engines to store knowledge in easily retrievable fashion. What we need are people who are creative, critical thinkers, socially competent, passionate about their chosen career, and able to learn on the job. These are the traits employers are seeking. They are also the traits that our schools suppress and are most fully developed when young people take charge of their own education. The pandemic-induced school closures have proven to many families that their children can learn well without school, which has led many to homeschooling and may eventually lead many to Self-Directed Education.

Increased numbers of families adopting Self-Directed Education will result in increased public pressure to divert some of the tax money currently spent on standard schools to support learning centres and other resources for Self-Directed Education. One possibility is that public libraries will morph into such learning centres. To some degree, this is already happening as many libraries are developing maker spaces, opportunities for free play, discussion groups of all sorts, and other opportunities for learning beyond just books. As

more resources become available for Self-Directed Education, more families will choose it, which will result in still more resources, in a beneficent cycle.

Phase II: Exploring career paths

For several decades now, the most common step after secondary school, for those who can afford it, is enrollment in a four-year college. Indeed, because of family and societal pressure, many young people see college as compulsory, essentially a continuation of high school—grades 13, 14, 15, and 16. Those years of schooling are even more expensive than the earlier ones, and this expense must generally be paid by the parents or through loans that can saddle a person for decades.

What does one get for that money and those additional four years of courses? One gets a bachelor's diploma, which, as our society currently operates, is a prerequisite for certain kinds of jobs. The diploma supposedly signifies that the person has been "educated" to a higher degree than someone without that diploma. But evidence is growing that little education actually occurs in those years (Arum & Roksa, 2011). Students study for tests and then forget what they learned, much as they did in high school. Students commonly choose courses because they are deemed to be easy, or likely to improve their grade-point average, or fit their preferred schedule, not because of a passionate interest. Here is how one college professor, Shamus Khan, has described this situation (Hayden, 2011): "I am part of a great credentialing mill... Colleges admit already advantaged Americans. They don't ask them to do much or learn much. At the end of four years, we give them a certificate. That certificate entitles them to higher earnings. Schools help obscure the aristocratic quality of American life. They do so by converting birthrights (which we all think are unfair) into credentials (which have the appearance of merit)."

College administrators have long argued that the main educational benefit of college is a gain in critical thinking, but systematic studies show that such gains are actually small overall,

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and for approximately 45% of students are non-existent (Arum & Roksa, 2011). I have been unable to find any evidence that critical thinking improves over four years of college more than it would have, in the same or similar people, if they had spent those years doing something else. In a survey conducted by PayScale Inc. a few years ago, 50% of employers complained that the college graduates they hire aren't ready for the workplace, and the primary reason they gave is lack of critical thinking skills (Belkin, 2017). My own observations suggest that critical thinking grows primarily through pursuing one's own interests and engaging in serious, self-motivated dialogues with others who share those interests, not from standard classroom practices.

One of the many problems with our current system is that, even after 17 years of schooling including college, students have little understanding of potential careers. The only adult vocation they have witnessed directly is that of classroom teacher. A student may decide, for some reason (maybe because it sounds prestigious), to become a doctor, or a lawyer, or a scientist, or a business executive, but the student knows little about what it means to be such a thing.

In the rational system I envision, students would spend time working in real-world settings that give them an idea of what a career entails before committing themselves to that career. For example, the person interested in becoming a doctor might work in a hospital for a period of time, maybe as an orderly or a medical assistant. Maybe it would be an official apprenticeship, with a bit of relevant course work as part of it, or maybe a regular job. By this means, the person would gain a practical understanding of what it is like to be a doctor and make a realistic assessment of whether or not this would be a good path for her or him. Do I like being in hospitals and around sick people? Do I have the compassion, fortitude, and reasoning skills required to be a good doctor? If the answer is no, then it is time to try out a different career path.

The same is true for any other career. The person interested in law might work in a law office; the person interested in being a scientist might work as a lab assistant or field assistant; the person interested in becoming a business executive might work as a clerk in a business

setting. In this way they would further their education and gain real-world experience while making at least some money rather than spending money. In the process, they would get to know, and be known by, professionals in the realm their interests, who could write recommendations that would help in applications for further training or advancement.

Already many companies, recognising that a typical college education doesn't prepare people well the company's work, have created apprenticeship programs and dropped the requirement of a college diploma for prospective employees. According to the US Department Labor (2020), the number of officially registered apprenticeships in the United States rose from about 350,000 in 2011 to about 640,000 in 2019. As typical examples, BMW has an apprenticeship program in Spartanburg, SC, for training engineers, and at least one commercial insurance company offers apprenticeships in claims adjustment and underwriting—jobs that formerly required a college degree.

There is reason to believe that the pandemic will hasten this movement away from college and toward apprenticeships or apprentice-like jobs. The economic fallout created by the pandemic wiped out the college savings of many families, which will lead more young people to seek other routes to their preferred careers. Moreover, when colleges opened with only or mainly distance learning in the 2020-2021 academic year, many students discovered that they or their parents would be paying tens of thousands of dollars just to watch lectures and take tests online, something they could otherwise do for free. People who had not previously thought about alternative ways of gaining a higher education began to think about them. College enrollments plummeted in the fall of 2020, just as public-school enrollments did.

In my vision, universities will not disappear, but will persist as places for government-supported science and scholarship. Young people who wish to pursue such careers would become apprentices there, working alongside of scientists and scholars in the fields of their dreams.

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Phase III: Becoming credentialed for specialised work

For some work it is imperative that the people doing it know what they are doing. Those are the jobs for which specialised training, guided by experts and evaluated by rigorous testing, may be essential. Anyone needing a surgeon, dentist, lawyer, or electrician would want to be sure that the person has been credentialed and licensed through means that include proof of competence and knowledge of proven best practices. This is the only phase of the educational system where testing should be essential. Such credentialing might in some cases be part and parcel of apprenticeship systems, or in other cases occur in schools for professional training, such as vocational schools, medical schools or engineering schools. So, the young woman who has explored a medical career by working as a medical assistant might, at some point, apply to medical school. For admission, she would have to present evidence that she knows what she is getting into and has prepared herself adequately to begin such training; and then, at the end, she would have to prove competence in whatever medical specialty she had chosen.

Concluding remark

In sum, what I have described here is an educational evolution that began before the pandemic and may be hastened by it into a revolution. It will be fascinating to see, over the next few years and decades, how much of this vision comes to pass.

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