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Crises and disruptions: Educational reflections, (re)imaginings, and (re)vitalization

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Abstract

COVID-19 has illuminated and exacerbated inequities, yet, as a crisis, it is not exceptional in its effect on education. We start this critical essay by situating the crisis in its historical, economic, and political contexts, illustrating how crisis and violence intersect as structural conditions of late modernity, capitalism, and their education systems. Situating the current crisis contextually lays the foundation to analyse how it has been interpreted through three sets of policy imaginaries, characterised by the notions of learning loss and building back better and by solutions primarily based on techno-education. These concepts reflect and are reflective of the international aid and development paradigm during the pandemic. Building on this analysis, we present, in the final section, an alternative radical vision that calls on a sociology of possibilities and pedagogies of hope that we see to be central to a new people-centred education imaginary to disrupt current inequalities and provide a new way of doing rather than a return to a business-as-usual approach in and through education.

Keywords: COVID-19, interlocking crises, violence, education policy, techno-education, inequalities, pedagogies of hope

Introduction

COVID-19 has illuminated and exacerbated the stark inequities between and within societies. Yet, as a crisis, it is not exceptional or unique in its effect on education. Refugees and displaced populations, children, and youth in conflict-affected and environmentally precarious contexts have invariably suffered educational interruption and disruption. We begin this critical essay by situating the crisis in its historical, economic, and political contexts, illustrating how crisis and violence intersect as both structural conditions of late modernity and capitalism, interlocking with existing inequities and fragilities. In this context, we point to how such crises (re)shape education systems, purpose, and values. We then consider the many diverse ways in which the COVID-19 crisis has been interpreted and narrated, focusing on three sets of images and imaginings that have been repeatedly used in education policy discourse, the media, and everyday life. The first set of images refer to learning loss, learning crises and learning poverty, the second set speak to imagining a way out of the crisis, including building back better, coping with the new normal and reset, while the third set cleave around the solution for the crisis, primarily techno-educational learning alternatives. The three sets of images are reflected in the international aid and development paradigm that we then discuss. In the final section of the essay, we present an alternative vision to the one currently in circulation. This vison advocates for a set of radical policy related provocations that we see as central to a new education imaginary that could make building back better a genuine attempt to disrupt current inequalities, rather than a slogan that heralds the return to business as usual. This alternative vision considers critically what education is for and whose interests it serves. In the global context, the pandemic calls for a hard reset in which the prevailing development paradigm is upended in favour of an alternative Southern development and educational epistemology that (re)centres itself on the Global South, its interests, and its people.

Situating the COVID-19 crisis as interlocking and intersecting with violence

Despite COVID-19 exacerbating inequities between and within societies, it is not exceptional as a crisis that has effects on education. Conflict, natural disasters, and systemic poverty invariably cause educational interruption and disruption. COVID-19 has certainly amplified pre-existing inequalities across the Global North and South, but it is unclear how this crisis differs from other crises. What is clear is that COVID-19 has garnered infinitely more attention and responses from policymakers in comparison to other crises. As a crisis the spread of the Coronavirus rapidly became global because, in part, of its effects on the global economy and the fact that its social effects, such as school lockdowns and closures, affected the middle class and upper classes extensively, calling into question how we understand crisis generally and what constitutes effective policy responses.

Koselleck and Richter's (2006) review of the concept of crisis helps to clarify the conceptual plurality of it across disciplines and time, aiding an analysis of this crisis and how it intersects

with crises of violence, environmental degradation, conflict, societal divisions, and anomie. The pandemic allows us to see this plurality; early medical use of the notion of crisis referred to opposite and binary outcomes rather than to multiple intersecting factors since a patient either recovered and lived or died (Koselleck & Richter, 2006). Like the medical use of the term, crisis regularly invokes images and discussions of ends and beginnings, birth and death, and apocalypse and portals of renewal. The early medical use of the term crisis resonates with the term crisis as a turning point where "systems face ruptures, radical changes or strengthening" (Rikowski, 2020, p. 12) that can result in positive or negative change, since, as we argue in this essay, rather than interpreting crisis as a binary opposition, it is more usefully thought of as a set of intersecting forces. Crises certainly create instability, affecting individuals, groups, and societies (Gamble, 2010). A Marxist reading of crisis, as endemic to capitalism, is founded on particular modes and relations of production structurally prone to negative rupturing events and cyclical instability. Yet, from crises synthesis and potential for fundamental social change also emerge. Crisis compels a search for alternatives in response to an unstable equilibrium, resulting in possibilities that can be positive and/or negative in their effects.

Crisis in a capitalist social formation cleaves societal strata through the market-based organisation of public goods, such as health and education services. Klein (2007) theorized this as the "shock doctrine" (see the title of her book) in that crises further commodify public goods, drawing attention to diswelfare caused by capitalism (Titmuss, 1965) and harming marginal groups excluded from the market-based provision of health, education, and welfare services. Socially fragmenting effects of the shock doctrine enable neo-liberal polices to claim that there is no alternative to the market. This sense of crisis is particularly relevant to examinations of COVID-19-related government decisions regarding the opening and closing of educational institutions, the procurement of Personal Protective Equipment (PPE), school sanitizing contracts and vaccine programmes, the provision of learning technologies essential for on-line education, and whose knowledges and voices were included and excluded in such crisis decision-making (see Sayed & Singh, 2020). Crises become the vector of, and portal to, particular policy imaginaries that are ideologically driven. In this way, ideological propositions of neo-liberalism are presented as a natural thrust or the only viable emergency response and naturalised as policy common-sense.

The Coronavirus interlocks with capitalism's search for growth and excessive individualist consumption that has resulted in an assault on the natural world through deforestation and animal trading, for example. World Wildlife Fund (WWF) Global Science (2020) argues that zoonotic diseases, such as SARs and MERS in which a virus is transferred from animals to humans represent the majority (more than 60%) of emerging infectious disease (EIDs) worldwide. Zoonotic diseases also involve transmission from humans to animals. An economic order that privileges human growth fails to see the human eco-system as part of an overall eco-system that includes the environment, as the notion of anthropocentricism has illuminated (Crutzen, 2006; Haraway, 2015). In this sense, such diseases are arguably reflective of the violence that a capitalist social order aggrandises by promoting individual consumption and economic growth since more and more of the natural environment is

destroyed, and humans are encroaching on the habitat of the animal and natural world, making possible these zoonotic diseases. The short-term model of economic growth results in the kind of crises and pandemics that the world is witnessing.

The structural violence inherent in capitalism that drives crisis is often also accompanied by physical violence. Wars and armed conflict in many different contexts are almost always accompanied by physical violence against the vulnerable, particularly women and girls (Akinwotu, 2021). However, crises as systems of violence interlock in situated and conjunctural ways. Some crises are felt more intensely in particular contexts, making them appear to be local crises, while others are truly global but experienced differently. Systemic violence intersects with and exacerbates inequality and alienation, contributing to localised social disruptions, as is being witnessed during this pandemic. In South Africa, a spate of criminality and violence in July 2021 resulted in the death of 130 people and billions of rands' worth of damage in a period of just eight days. The violence started in the province of KwaZulu-Natal (KZN) and spread to parts of Gauteng but was quickly contained there. Many small and large businesses were stripped bare, and a large number of buildings were razed to the ground. Over a hundred schools in KZN and Gauteng were ransacked, vandalized, or completely destroyed during the mayhem. While several social and political forces coalesced, there are clear indications that this event also involved orchestrated violence and manufactured crisis. At a webinar on the July violence, activist Busisiwe Diko (2021) used the term "lockdown anger" to describe the way in which pandemic frustrations, particularly for people in informal settlements, have spilled over into most aspects of life, creating conditions for physical violence to erupt. Conceptually then, in this instance at least, crisis cannot be decoupled from violence.

Crises also reflect a violence against the social values and bonds that bind citizens and nation states. Crises like the Corona crisis and protest movements reveal the weak and fragile social ties that bind citizens to the state in unequal capitalist societies. In the absence of collective forms of solidarity, identity, and vision, responses to the crisis that catalyse social justice are difficult to produce. Yet, as the vortex of violence in South Africa during July 2021 demonstrated, there were examples of solidarities that transcended race, religion, gender, and sexuality. These collectivist responses of, for example, cleaning up damaged shops and towns, supplying food when the national supply chain broke down, and protecting communities were starker in the absence of state (in)action that was marked by indecision, hesitation, and internal divisions within the ruling party. While some solidarities transcended race, others revealed traditional fault lines of racial division and racialized inequality when some civic responses opened spaces for vigilantism and criminality in the unfolding chaos.

Crises then, as in the case of the Corona crisis, interlock both with existing frailties and coalitions and intersect with existing challenges against colonialism, subjugation, and marginalisation. The Corona crisis occurred and overlapped with the Black Lives Matter Protest, and the protests against the amendments to the Citizenship Act in India that sought to disenfranchise millions while selectively enfranchising particular groups in favour of a

narrow Hindutva ideology.[1] The Corona crisis reflects not only a notion of change but is reflective of the deep-seated and unequal relations in society, exposing and exacerbating these as many have noted (McCann & Matenga, 2020). In this sense, crisis and crisis-responses are inherently political acts in terms of the power to pivot and change. In many instances the interlocking, intersecting, and inter-relational nature of the Corona crisis is seen to deepen vulnerabilities. But pivoting and advancing effects are not easy to find in contexts of educational and social inequality.

Violence is also observed in the way in which COVID-19 policy attention displaced and marginalised other pre-existing crises, such as TB programmes, as well as child vaccination programmes and school feeding programmes. An important consequence of the hegemony of the COVID-19 pandemic is, therefore, the way in which it has exacerbated other crises. Masri (2021) called for attention to be paid to the more than 82 million displaced persons because of a much larger global crisis than the pandemic. Likewise, John (2020) employed a metaphorical coupling by associating the invisible enemy against which the SA president was marshalling the nation to fight with another larger and long-term invisible enemy—inequality. In similar vein, Smith et al. (2021) penned *The double burden of COVID-19* to highlight the COVID-19-inequality nexus. Reference to the triple pandemics of COVID-19, poverty, and gender-based violence has emerged (Moletsane, 2020). A recent call for papers for the American Educational Research Association (2021) went on to identify four pandemics in its claim that "Education faces a myriad of challenges and opportunities. Among them are residual effects of the four pandemics . . . the COVID-19 pandemic, the pandemic of systemic racism, the economic crisis, and the climate crisis" (para. 1). It is significant that in all these couplings of other so-called pandemics to COVID-19, attention is being drawn to different forms of structural violence and long-term struggles for class, race, gender, and climate justice.

Understanding and situating the Corona crisis, therefore, suggests that it has become a signifier of the absences, silences, and marginality of other chronic endemic crises. Ignoring its interlocking, inter-relational, and intersectional character may result in poorly conceived policy choices and policy options. In acknowledging the COVID-19 pandemic as a polyvalent crisis requires providing voice to multiple actors and civil society organisations in policymaking. Instructive in this respect is the legal action taken by the South African NGO, Equal Education, to ensure that the Department of Basic Education continues with the National School Nutrition Programme (NSNP) that had been stopped because of COVID-19. Interlocking and inter-relational crises thus require a policy approach that does not ignore important existing programmes and interventions for the marginalised, nor silence the voices of those most impacted. A stark warning about ignoring crises as interlocking was offered by Ahunna Eziokonwa, lead author of a major UNDP report on the effect of the pandemic on Africa, as cited by Burke (2021, August 13) in *The Guardian*.

1 Hindutva ideology refers to the form of nationalism sponsored by the currently ruling Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) in India. In broad terms it evokes and mobilises on narrow ethnic, social, religious, and cultural lines invoking an ideal of what it means to be a pure Hindu in India, thus othering those who fall outside of the reductionist and homogenising tendencies of such a movement. The BJP is the current ruling party in India and its policies, it is argued, reflect a Hindutva ideology.

> People have nothing to lose any more. When they are on the edge, they are that much more given to being violent or being instrumentalised by politicians who exploit their anger, and that is a clear and present danger . . .

The least acknowledged form of violence during crises may therefore be epistemic violence, that includes the lack of consultation with those in the front line, a narrow reliance on particularist forms of knowledge to justify the response to the pandemic, and the denial of the view of the subaltern, manifest in the ways in which many knowledges were (not) recognised during the pandemic.

Imaginings and the narration of crisis

As systems of disruption, crises are also about policy choices offering possibilities for the emergence of new ideas and critiques of current practices and for finding new ways of innovatively and collectively resolving social problems and forging ahead. Disruption, seen this way, is redolent of recognition and progressive potential but also, as argued below, of policy blind spots. These problems and possibilities are evident in the ways in which crises are narrated and the images used to describe them. In the case of the COVID-19 pandemic the images that have captured the possible education responses have been driven by three sets of imaginings.

The first imagining has been presented as learning loss, learning crises, and learning poverty, thus addressing the accumulating deficits in the time required to complete curriculum coverage and attain benchmarked learning outcomes. These images narrate the crisis as the real loss of learning content since schools are shut or have been partially reopened to offer rotational access for leaners. This imagining of the crisis re-focuses the education enterprise as one of learning content and this crisis has rendered this difficult to implement as intended and designed. Equity is woven into these images of a poverty of learning with marginalised and impoverished learners suffering greater learning loss and sinking deeper into a learning crisis. While undeniably true, it is the narrow range of policy prescriptions that are contestable in their focusing on a recovery mode that privileges a narrow idea of cognitive learning, curriculum coverage, and completion as the hallmark of recovery.

The second set of images speaks to an alternative imagining of the way out of the crisis. Building back better, coping with the new normal, and resetting capture the search for an alternative way of educating and developing education systems. These voluntaristic imaginings suggest a rupture or break from the past and present that is conceived of as failing and riven by weaknesses. Yet it is never fully articulated what these exact weaknesses are, what is being reset, what defines the new normal, and what building back better looks like. These aspects remain opaque and elusive, defying definition and shifting shape and form in the discursive ways in which crisis solutions are narrated by the powerful.

The third set of images adhere around the solution to the crisis. They are the syntheses that are invoked to resolve the crises as antithesis. These are primarily techno-education images that privilege technology-driven learning alternatives. The techno-education imaginary, as

critiqued by Langthaler (2021), conceives of the pandemic as being aligned to the fourth industrial revolution (4IR) that emphasises greater technologisation and digitalisation of teaching and learning. These imaginings advocate the flipped classroom and hybrid/blended/hy-flex learning as vital modalities of education, in and for the future. Herrera (2020) described COVID-19 as the "great accelerator" (para. 4) of the digital transformation of education and EdTech in Egypt. Such approaches manifested early in the pandemic and suggested emergency responsive teaching as the imaginary, thus capturing the zeitgeist of the pandemic. In the context of education digitalisation, the door is flung open for large education companies and the growing intensification of educational corporatisation to control the architecture of the education enterprise and take ownership of content. The risk of techno-education is that

> [t]hrough the provision of digital tools, private EdTech corporations have gained significant influence on curricula, methods and administrative procedures in schools and universities . . . In particular in Africa, international education providers use digitalization to marketize their business models . . . The goal is to replace costly professionals by low-skilled operators and to reduce the cost of infrastructure. (Langthaler, 2021, para. 2, 4)

Clearly, we need more research into who benefits from techno educational interventions in times of crisis and beyond.

Techno-education as a solution to the crisis is evident across all contexts, albeit unevenly so. Techno-education as online learning has been firmly embedded in the provision of education as a response to the crisis, as well as a modality for future education provision in many countries. In others, including, for example, India and South Africa, techno-education takes the form of online private tutoring and hybrid learning in better-resourced schools and homes, while marginalising important aspects of education provision such as adult education.

In South Africa specifically, forms of techno-education, located in contrasting parts of the education system, played out differently for a range of learners and their families. The dual structure of South African schooling means that about 67% of schools are no-fee ones that service the impoverished Black majority, and the rest are, largely, former model C and elite independent schools (Vally, 2019). Forms of blended learning were favoured by former Model C and independent schools, combining techno-education with face-to-face instruction. More affluent schools followed a path that suited their educators and learners without much interference from authorities. These schools transitioned to blended learning in combining online and face-to-face instruction, using techno-educational resources of home laptops, internet connections, and data to ensure that teaching and learning continued (Reddy et al., 2020; Taylor, 2020). Wealthier schools provided families with printed materials to take home as well as detailed instructions and support through, for example, WhatsApp chat groups, explaining tasks to be completed and giving instructions on how to use sites like google classroom or D6 communication platforms (Taylor, 2020). This created a structured home learning environment enabled by coordinated efforts between the school and the home. Privileged schools, therefore, continued to operate, partially online, through various forms of

techno-education, drawing on the range of social, cultural, and material capital that well-off parents and their homes provide and blending the resources of the home and school in eclectic ways that were minimally governed. Online private tutoring in both school and tertiary education through the shadow education industry (Bray, 2021) privatised the public space of education, reinforcing systems of privilege and advantage.

Poor schools were brought to a virtual standstill since learners attending no-fee schools in South Africa generally struggled to find quiet work places, desks, computers, internet connectivity, and parents or other adults with the capacity to supervise learning at home (Parker et al., 2020: Reddy, 2021). Lockdown experiences were therefore radically different for families in the poorer no-fee segment of the education system. The prohibitive costs of data and lack of access to devices like smart phones and computers made it difficult for poor parents to communicate with schools and download documents, not to mention addressing insecurities about drawing up work programmes at home (Taylor, 2020). Poor parents remain reduced to peripheral supporters of school educators, checking homework, serving on the School Governing Body, and attending meetings at school, activities that are endorsed by the South African education system (Daniels, 2020). Affluent parents were able to assist with techno-educational provision, serving as co-educators responsible for the academic socialisation of their children, a role that American research has shown to be most conducive to fostering academic success (Hill & Tyson, 2009).

The three images reveal a particular policy imaginary of effect and response, varied across nations. What is known as a crisis of learning metamorphises into the techno-education policy imaginary, particularly for the poor, that is the building back better and the imagined reset. The past is presented as troubled, broken, and faulty; the so-called new normal is presented as natural and as the only alternative. The policy choices available and the policy imaginary are narrowed to a limited range that present a reduced focus on learning content. The expansive approach of educational doing and being and the privileging of other goals of education, including the affective, are effectively delegitimated. Rooted in a circumscribed imaginary of education crises, the future becomes one of education recovery, as captured in the urgent 10-point plan proposed by the World Bank (2021). The 10 actions named by the Bank that countries can take to recover and accelerate learning include assessing and monitoring learning loss, providing remedial education and socio-emotional support, restructuring the academic calendar, adapting the curriculum, supporting teachers and school management, communicating with stakeholders, encouraging re-enrolment, minimising disease transmission, and supporting learning at home (World Bank, 2021).

The recovery mode described above circumscribes education as content acquisition, with cognitive learning the ostensible key. Even where the affective is acknowledged, this is instrumentalised as support for catch-up, retention, and stress management, rather than as promoting educator well-being and preventing burnout. The image-laden narration of the pandemic reveals an overriding concern with the diminished learning time and content, measured in the number of teaching days lost, leading to decreases in projected cognitive learning outcomes. Projected content learning loss (World Bank, 2021) invokes a language of

learning crisis and learning poverty, as noted above. Yet, this approach instrumentalises learning and diminishes the focus on the affective and relational, failing to acknowledge a more holistic understanding and approach to education quality.

The techno-education approaches are argued as being consistent with the imperatives of 4IR. Proponents of technology have seen the crisis as the solution to the preparation of young people for the new industrial revolution marked by block chain technology and technological competencies (see World Bank, 2020). Yet such advocates rarely speak of the deep-seated inequality that marks the 4IR. In policy deliberations and choices about education, the striking issue that emerges is how the so-called solutions proposed not only reveal but also exacerbate education inequalities and render silent and absent a particular economic order being proposed (Chowdury & Jomo, 2020). And, in particular, the techno-education approach facilitates the ongoing privatisation creep into education that undermines the idea of education as a common public good.

Techno-education, as referred to in this paper, is reflective of how neo-colonialism continues to hold the Global South in a dependent relationship through the new technologies and new platforms evident during the pandemic, resulting in what some have called digital colonisation (see Kwet, 2021) These forms of neo-colonialism are evident in the ownership of software learning packages, learning platforms, and communication tools owned and managed by large corporations such as Google, Amazon, Microsoft (Ferreira et al., 2020; Kwet, 2021). This digital colonisation is evident in the extraction of raw resources and commodities such as cobalt for new technologies from Africa as well as the exploration of cheap advanced technology labour in what Kwet (2021) refers to as the silicon valleys of the Global South.

Crisis and international aid: Rethinking the education and development paradigm

The pandemic reveals not only inequities between and within nation states but also the regressive fault lines of the current international development architecture and aid system, with many countries in the Global North cutting back on aid and retreating into chauvinistic nationalism, including through vaccine nationalism, for example (Khoo, 2020). The current crisis is not an exceptional event but is part of the system of neoliberalism, marked by the increasing privatisation of social sectors, the growing inequalities between and within nation states, and the emphasis on the individual at the expense of collective and social solidarity. In particular, the pandemic reveals how the international system seems paralysed to act in concert globally as it seeks to work with and mitigate the behaviours of pharmaceutical corporations driven by the profit motive. During the crisis this form of capitalism has revealed how knowledge (about vaccine manufacture, for example) that should be part of a global public good and commons is privatised and nation states in the Global South are unable to negotiate with corporations. At the same time, the approach of a country like Cuba, for example, demonstrates excellent work towards the benefit of people globally by, for example, sharing the vaccine it has developed and providing health expertise to many

countries in the Global South. Yet Cuba struggles to gain a foothold in the health system since its vaccine is neither globally recognised nor supported. This inequality in the way in which the global system operates is manifest in the fact that of 4.8bn COVID-19 vaccine doses delivered around the world to date, around 75% have gone to just 10 countries (*The Guardian*, 2021, 13 August). In Africa, where a third wave of the virus has been on the march since May 2021, less than 2% of the continent's population has received a first dose. While high-income countries around the globe have administered about 100 doses for every 100 citizens, the equivalent figure for low-income countries is 1.5. Britain has played a leading role in opposing calls for intellectual property rights for vaccines to be temporarily waived.

The pandemic also reveals what Khoo (2020) termed "unknowing" and what he described as "cognitive frames that present development" as a question of "Northern knowledge" and competence versus "Southern lack of knowledge or incompetence" resulting in "active production of global ignorance, with serious effect" (Khoo, 2020, p. 7). Khoo's thesis on the pandemic is significant in its revelation of a developmental paradigm in which the gaze is on the South but that fails to note that there have been previous global pandemics from which the North could have learnt from the South, as in the case of the Ebola crisis in Sierra Leone. More significantly, the pandemic shines a spotlight on the paradigm of development that assumes that the Other, namely the South, is unprepared in comparison to the North that is presented as prepared, ready, and able to manage. If anything, the pandemic has revealed that inequality, poor governance, corruption, along with despotic and authoritarian actions, are not the sole preserve of states in the Global South (Sayed & Singh, 2020). The pandemic calls for new ways of understanding development that see the world not only in terms of geographical boundary positions of rich and poor and North and South, but also as riven by systems of production and forms of governance underpinned by relational inequality. In this way it speaks to a notion of development that the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) framework sought to articulate, i.e., that poverty remains as Titmuss (1965) suggested, the unacceptable stigmatising face of inequality, a global problem that pits the wealthy against the impoverished, the strong against the weak, and is not a specific feature of a particular state or space or time. It is important to recognise that during the first phase of the pandemic (April to June 2020) the top five billionaires saw a 26% increase in their wealth (Makau, 2021).

The multilateral global system came under sustained attacked as chauvinistic nationalism rapidly displaced the impulse, advocated most prominently by Dr Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus, head of the World Health Organisation (WHO), for a collective, solidaristic global response to the pandemic. The subsequent paranoid attack, in particular by the demagogic populist Donald Trump, on the WHO reflected such a chauvinistic trend (Makau, 2021). Further, with perhaps the rare exception of the Scandinavian social democracies such as Sweden (Larsen, 2021) countries in the Global North privileged access to vaccines in favour of their states to the detriment of those most needing them. Large pharmaceutical companies sought to delay as long as possible making knowledge about their vaccine available, asserting their intellectual rights to commodify health products and thus preclude

countries in the Global South from developing their own vaccines. These examples reflect the enduring efforts by certain countries and large corporations to continue the neo-colonial dependency of the Global South. Comfort Ero, the African programme director of International Crisis Group as cited in *The Guardian* by Burke (2012, para. 4), stated,

> It is a story in two parts . . . In the first chapter, the continent appeared more resilient in the face of the pandemic than many more developed parts of the world. There were lots of concerns that it would all go to hell but it didn't. The next chapter may see all the things that didn't play out in 2020 beginning to reveal themselves.

The things that did not play out in the first chapter include increases in extreme poverty, unemployment, infant mortality, graduate unemployment, food hunger and scarcity, loss of remittances and insecurity, and a reduction in aid budgets, all of which threaten the achievement of the SDGs. A study[2] by United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) (2021, p. 69) noted that

> even after the health crisis has been controlled by limiting the spread of the virus and eventually distributing a vaccine, the impacts of the pandemic will be far from over, with long-term increases in disease prevalence and mortality across countries, long-term changes to economic structures, shifts in patterns of international trade, and wide, predominantly negative implications for government investment and human progress in areas such as education, health, poverty eradication and child mortality.

Yet, the pandemic reveals an alternative progressive imaginary, albeit an inchoate one still in formation: the Cuban public health doctors sent to South Africa and Italy; the Cuban Abdala vaccine, produced entirely independently of the circuits of global pharmaceutical capital; the Crisis Recovery Facility created by the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) to provide $13bn of financing for recovery; and the low cost, progressive pandemic response by resource-constrained contexts like Vietnam and India's Kerala state (Chowdury & Jomo, 2020).

In the case of Kerala, it is significant that the state used progressive ideas and messaging such as substituting the term social distancing with physical distancing to signify a rupture with the alienating class and caste estrangement suggested by the former term and used the metaphor of breaking the chains to signify overcoming oppression (Chowdury & Jomo, 2020). In these ways the Kerala state suggested an alternative model of development in using progressive and inclusive socialist values and ideas to counter the socially alienating effects of the pandemic and build broad-based class and cast solidarity.

These examples speak to alternative forms of development, or what Makua (2021) referred to as a paradigm shift that has the potential to facilitate new horizontal and equitable approaches to international development and displace the current outmoded hierarchical international

2 This study was led by Eziakonwaa including Willem Verhagen, David K Bohl, Jakkie Cilliers, Barry B, Hughes, Stellah Kwasi, Kaylin McNeil, Marius Oosthuizen, Luca Picci, Mari-Lise du Preez, Yutang Xiong, and Jonathan D. Moyer.

development architecture that has proven unfit for purpose (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development [OECD], 2020). The warning of Santos (2001, p. 187) is important here.

> One possible future is therefore the spread of societal fascism. There are many signs that this is a real possibility. If the logic of the market is allowed to spill over from the economy to all fields of social life and to become the sole criterion for successful social and political interaction, society will become ungovernable and ethically repugnant . . .

An alternative framing of ways of knowing and doing development, in which development is presented as a linear trajectory and crises are seen as minor to major road bumps to be overcome along the journey, could change the modernity thesis. In contrast, Makau (2021) and Khoo (2020) have called for an alternative development imaginary rooted in and based on the voices of the marginal, those on the global periphery i.e., people whose lived experiences and priorities are generally not reflected in the mainstream development paradigm.

Crises and an alternative policy imaginary

The writer Arundhati Roy (2020) suggested in the title of her article that "the pandemic is a portal", and that the appalling inequalities regarding health and life that have been revealed are simply the newest manifestation of a continual crisis with an accompanying demand for reckoning, opened up by the struggles in the Global South. To this end we offer a vision of education that is an alternative to the current proposals in circulation in its outlining of a progressive approach to education innovation in response to the pandemic.

This plan is marked by changing the discourse and policy imaginary. Many of the current education approaches and much of the messaging unduly and disproportionately speak to a contextual vision predicated on loss and crisis. Reponses to such a context are couched in the language of curriculum recovery and remedial catch up in a deficit discourse that presumes that nothing has or can been learnt. While there is some merit in such a concern, we argue, following the agency model of Kerala, India, that this should be couched in an equity focused and social justice driven approach that speaks to an alternative pedagogy of affirmation and hope. Such a pedagogy of hope should foreground the experiences of the educator and the marginalised learner and illuminate a pathway through the crisis mapped on eradicating educational inequality and overcoming epistemic violence. To this end, we advocate an educational vision that speaks to eradicating learning inequality by affirming and validating the knowledge of the marginalised and impoverished. This should, in other words, constitute a point of pedagogical departure, and not be viewed, condescendingly, as a knowledge deficit to be filled up through either a catch-up or deposit process debunked by Paulo Freire (1970) more than 50 years ago.

Achieving this "new pedagogy of the oppressed", to quote the title of Freire's (1970) work, for the marginalised in the global order requires a humble form of unknowing. Much of the

Coronavirus discourse could be seen as a modernist project with the virus perceived as disrupting a linear development trajectory. However, as argued above, the virus calls into question the development paradigm that currently dominates thinking in calling, instead, for alternative southern epistemologies and a development paradigm that is centred on the South. This would turn on development as a humane and empathetic practice focused on people and growth that is respectful of the environment, equitable, and inclusive. This call for what we are calling an unknowing education system and curriculum (re)centres the subaltern and marginal knowledges, displacing the specific Northern-centric ways of knowing that have an exclusionary hegemonic dominance. Ladson-Billings (2021, p. 72) has talked about the need for a "hard re-set", since "going back" for black students in the US means returning to an oppressive education system. She called for a culturally relevant pedagogy as part of this hard re-set, one that "better reflects students' lives and cultures" and "the purposes of education in a society that is straining from the problems of anti-Black racism, police brutality, mass incarceration, and economic inequality." A hard re-set, to use her example of New Orleans and the devastating effect of hurricane Katrina, does not see the crisis as an opportunity to move public education in the direction and favour of market-based, neo-liberal Charter school education approaches.

A social justice pedagogy underpinned by unknowing supports learning to nurture social consciousness and develop global solidarity, ensuring that learners have the knowledge, skills, and dispositions to understand the natural eco-system and how human action and instrumentalist notions of growth result in the crises and has resulted in the pandemic we witness today. Such a pedagogy would include a focus on education for sustainable development, education for human rights and justice, respect for diversity, critical digital literacies, and conflict resolution. More importantly, such a curriculum would provide the understanding that individual action should be accompanied by structural change. For example, we cannot tackle carbon emission only by curricula and individual action but also by recognising that 71% of carbon emission is the result of no more than about 100 companies. We need to empower learners with the competence and agency to rethink the world order and see their individual action as part of a broader set of transformative actions required to change how the world functions, how we want it to function, and whom it should serve.

Such an approach does not see learning and education as the prerogative of the young, but as an integral task of all human activity through the lifespan. To this end, adult learning and education (ALE) has received very little attention in COVID-19-related crisis discourses. This is an extension of the usual silence and absence (Santos, 2001) related to this sector in many countries where ALE has historically been marginal and mostly underfunded. All the teaching and learning activities of this sector would have been affected by COVID-19, as have been the lives and livelihoods of educators and the learning opportunities for adults. Yet one would be hard pressed to find any media coverage of this phenomenon. The disruptions and learning loss concerns for learners in schools and higher education continue to dominate. And so, too, the monitoring, scholarship, and activism around ALE during and because of the pandemic, are invisible. The ongoing absence of ALE is telling. Why are there no learning

loss concerns for adults and why a lack of urgency about plans to reopen or build back better? Part of the answer to these questions is that ALE has long been in compensatory, redress, and second-chance modes in several countries.

Instead of being fashioned as vibrant, proactive, and developmental, lifelong learning and education as expressed in global frameworks such as the Delors Report (1996) and the Sustainable Development Goals (United Nations, 2015), ALE is still firmly cast as provision for the miss-educated and miseducated. In other words, it is for those who missed out on formal education and those who attended school but were failed by this system and thus need a second chance. There is a sense that these learners can wait a little longer and there are seemingly fewer consequences for the economy and society from disruptions and learning-loss here. Yet the levels of violence and inequality discussed throughout this article call for a revitalisation of this sector to contribute to the urgent projects of recovery, rebuilding, and re-humanisation.

To be clear, such calls are nothing new; they were signalled by neglected pillars of the 1996 Delors report that called for greater attention to be paid to "[l]earning to live together, by developing an understanding of other people and an appreciation of interdependence" (p. 97). Goal 16 of the Sustainable Development Goals to "[p]romote peaceful and inclusive societies for sustainable development, provide access to justice for all and build effective, accountable and inclusive institutions at all levels" is a more recent endorsement of the direction signalled by the Delors framework for a less crisis-prone development model (United Nations, 2015, p. 21).

Besides breaking down age and generational boundaries in reimagining education for all, divisions between homes and schools also need to be reinvented to foster inter-connected educational ecologies that build vibrant democratic participation. Home and school are too often perceived as independent spaces, rather than a set of inter-connected relationships that form part of overall educational ecologies. The notion of blended learning, so prominent during the pandemic, has highlighted inter-connections between spaces and the ways in which inequalities are exacerbated through connected educational ecologies. Moves to blended learning have resonated with the home-schooling movement that has proliferated in the US and that has effectively cocooned affluent students in a technologically enhanced bubble, exacerbating existing inequalities through home-school intersections. American home-schooling has negatively affected democratic citizenship and common reference points. Charter school legislation made provision for what was called independent study. Two decades ago, Charter schools comprised 50% of California's schools (Apple, 2000) and continue to insulate privileged minorities from the general population, thus engaging in a form of cocooning. Home-schooling functions like other semi-segregated sectors of society, such as gated living communities, to provide a physical and ideological security zone to which individuals can retreat, thus avoiding crime, taxes, poor schools, and undesirable ideas (Apple, 2000). Similarly, the form that blended learning has taken during the pandemic cocoons affluent students and families and keeps them away from the public sphere, insulating them from participating in democratic forms of citizenship and from being exposed

to a range of reference points. Choosing to live in specific cocoons undermines the basis of democracy because common experiences and information form the cornerstone of mutual understanding, empathy, and social cohesion (Apple, 2000). Rather than cocooning, new forms of educational justice should aspire to redraw educational ecologies by opening the doors of learning in ways that enhance solidarity and invigorate democracy.

Part of the challenge inherent in reimagining educational ecologies involves creating spaces that promote the transcending of neoliberal understandings of choice in catalysing public spaces that support forms of collective and connective action. Globally, in the four decades prior to the crisis, schools and educators were increasingly reigned in and governed through marketised, neoliberal logics based on choice, competition, and managerialism. This produced a form of conservative modernisation in which education, as one component of democracy, was reduced to consumption practices and citizenship to individual choice (Apple, 2001, 2003). The effects of this kind of logic were exacerbated during the crisis, including in South Africa. For example, after the first COVID-19 wave, the South African government emphasised that parents could choose home education or send their children back to school. The terms that needed to be adhered to for curriculum, pedagogy, and assessment meant that no poor parent could realistically choose home education.[3] The supposed choice portrayed through the home education policy was hopelessly out of touch with the lived realities of most South African parents, problematically assuming the home and school to be segregated spaces with independent functions. However, more affluent schools and the learners who attend them were able to transcend this binary choice, creating, instead, a larger spectrum of options, simply by blending resources from the home and school in various forms to create unique learning ecologies. In this and in many other ways, discourses of neoliberal choice have become entrenched in marketised education provision, shaping institutional arrangements, material conditions, and ideological effects that make particular pathways available for different groups, based on their position in society. Discourses that emphasise the freedoms of the decision-making individual protecting their family and cultural heritage function to enable privileged groups to use "the market . . . as a class strategy . . . creating a mechanism that can be exploited by the middle classes as a strategy of reproduction in their search for relative advantage, social advancement, and mobility" (Ball, 1993, p. 17). Racialising effects are bound up in these processes since dominant groups are able to insulate themselves and their children through this sort of choice (Apple, 2009; Gillborn, 2008; Lauder & Hughes, 1999). The crisis has therefore highlighted the need for educational institutions to be underpinned by practices that embody alternative logics and ideologies to those associated with this apparent choice, promoting forms of collective and connective action that enhance democratic participation and interactions across class, as well as raced and gendered lines.

An alternative to neoliberal choice discourses so integral to current education logics that promote competition and conflict, must foster forms of empathy and care, characterised by forms of affective learning. The Corona crisis has revealed a glaring gap in the education system as far as empowering and equipping learners with the non-cognitive or the affective

3 See https://www.gov.za/sites/default/files/gcis_document/202005/Home%20Education%20Policy%20.pdf

dimension of learning is concerned. Learning to live together, learning to care, learning to be empathetic, learning to be both a critical national and global citizen are important aspects of education that have been neglected and delegitimated in favour of a narrow curriculum focus on the basics with the core reduced to literacy and numeracy. While these are important, they are patently inadequate for supporting learners in a period of crisis requiring socio-emotional learning, citizenship learning, resilience learning, along with conflict resolution, crisis adaptation, and management skills. All these aspects are part of a required focus on the affective and relational that is privileged here as equally important, if not more so, than the cognitive.

Affective learning needs to create empathy rather than hostility towards teachers, a group too often characterised as lazy, uninterested, and the reason behind low-quality education for the poor. The Corona crisis has shown that teachers are front-line agents who need to be protected. Too often teachers have been marginalised and placed on the periphery of decision making with their needs largely ignored. Yet it is teachers who are ultimately the fundamental policy frontline workers for the tasks of mitigating and responding to crises. Their marginal positioning is reinforced by the techno-education discussed earlier that places curriculum change, decision-making, and agency in the hands of scripted online learning and learning tools. Breaking the chain of education inequality requires bringing to the fore the agential autonomy of teachers as knowing actors.

The notion of teachers as autonomous agents hints at a form of meaningful democratic participation that should extend to policymaking. Equitable policy participation and engagement is, especially in times of crisis, too often relegated to the realm of the unimportant in favour of emergency modes of acting. Invoking states of emergency and emergency regulations akin to periods of conflict and war, while perhaps understandable in the short term, denies grassroots actors and organisations the space in which to engage in deliberative policymaking. In particular, marginalised actors and organisations, representing the majority, the impoverished, and the voiceless, often find it difficult to secure a place at the policymaking table. The centralised nature of policy formation is often cloaked in, and resorts to, the technocracy of so-called scientific knowledge that underestimates or misrecognises the social nature of crises. This has become patently apparent in education policymaking in many countries. Inclusion and valorisation of peoples' knowledge and what radical educators call really useful knowledge, generated from solidarities from below, can help to mitigate some crises and to humanise crisis responses.

Inclusive forms of policymaking may help to eradicate the structural violence experienced by the impoverished, by, for example, protecting girls and women from gender-based violence in their homes and communities: many education institutions are not safe spaces for them. One indicator of gender-based violence in schools and communities are the statistics related to learner pregnancy in Gauteng province, South Africa. Over 23,000 learners fell pregnant in the year ending March 2021, while 934 girls between the ages of 10 and 14, gave birth (Bhengu, 2021). Education institutions need to recognise the imperative to become safe protective spaces and nurturing environments for all and, in particular, the marginalised.

These measures discussed above are part of a strategy to build, create, and nurture responsive and resilient education systems that are prepared for crises and that support equitable and quality learning and lifelong education for all, particularly the most disadvantaged and marginalised. Resilient and responsive systems are able not only to mitigate the shock of future systems but to proactively support and prepare critical citizens able to engage meaningfully in society for their own, familial, community, societal, and global benefits. This requires an education approach that opposes the creeping privatisation of public education and the use of techno-education without reflecting on whom it benefits. Such an alternative approach that advocates for a hard new reset (Ladson-Billings, 2021) will fail if it is not part of an integrated, progressive, socialist set of measures and actions in which we rethink development paradigms and do not promote economic growth at all costs. We need a social order that fundamentally tackles inequality and that deviates from the linear economic growth-at-all-cost model of development. The founding mandate of the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) points out the importance of the origin and ending of wars. In a similar way, the post pandemic world requires a mindset that imagines a future that is equitable, one in which the human eco-system contributes positively to the wider environment, rather than current models of growth and economic production that are wanting and/or damaging. We need to imagine a way of reading the world (Freire, 1970) in which it is possible to see humanist, collectivist, solidaristic, and equitable values that implement a caring and inclusive growth paradigm centred on human development, humanisation, and respect for the natural world. This can build resilient countries with resilient populations, thus contributing to a resilient world order. This would be a more sustainable and hopeful model of building back better, for all.

Conclusion

In this essay, we have highlighted the complex interplay in understanding the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on education at the global, regional, and national level. The crisis, arguably a natural zoonotic phenomenon, has in its social manifestation sharply illuminated and intensified inequities in and through education, revealing frailties and fragilities that have been glossed over. It has intersected and interlocked with existing crises rendering the vulnerable and marginalised more impoverished, pushing millions into extreme poverty, in contrast to the wealthy and the powerful who have often become wealthier and more powerful. Yet it has, as Santos (2001) has argued, been a powerful narrative of a sociology of silence and absence, a silencing that reveals a very narrow set of educational priorities that neglect adult and community education, for example. It has relegated to the margins a concern with pedagogy as a relational and repackaged neo-liberal education solution of choice, privatisation, and individual aggrandisement. Yet as a portal it has pointed to an inchoate, opaque, fleeting-but-powerful narrative of the emergence of an alternative orthodoxy along with projecting possibilities, developing collectivities, and solidaristic thinking. In so doing, it points to a sociology of possibilities and pedagogies of hope that should avoid the glib rhetoric of building back better. Instead, it is about a collective conversation and consciousness, an alternative and humanistic educational vision rooted in the idea of global common and public goods. The pandemic is about more than building back

differently; it is a reminder that mitigating its effects requires sustained, increased, and continued investment in public infrastructure, public delivery systems, and, most importantly, people, as Cuba and Vietnam demonstrate. The shock doctrine of crises should not lead to an even more egregious, greedy, and pernicious capitalism.

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