Post-pandemic opportunities for change towards the common good

NEOLIBERALISM IN EDUCATIONAL CURRICULUM-STYLE DESIGN

The post-pandemic era is an opportunity for much-needed education reform. The COVID-19 pandemic provides a trigger point for change. Chris Green, a specialist in educational reform, says it’s time to turn our backs on the neoliberal constructs that define the current ranking-fixated education system, and devise a more values-based education system.

The government's response to the COVID-19 pandemic was to recalibrate education to bring it under the firm control of central government and with greater teacher accountability, to serve the perceived needs of the economy. Western countries were to remain powerful economic and political forces in the face of aggressive competition, 'proper' education was vital. To be 'proper', it had to be linked to neoliberal values that emphasised the importance of free-market competition and qualified human progress in terms of sustained economic growth. School students needed to be economically productive outputs.

This 'educational reform' therefore linked education planning to economic development, examination boards, and the privatised industries of prescribed textbooks, international assessment testing, benchmarking, comparative rankings in performance and profit. While this may have been for educators and learners, given how schools adapted, it probably accelerated calls for systemic changes in curriculum content design away from an increasingly outdated political and economic policy model. One education specialist says a post-pandemic education system should focus less on rankings, be more values-based, and give energy to curricula integration and teaching based on exploration, moral and ethical rigour, and critical thinking.

Calls for systemic change to Western education systems are growing louder, following the emergence of an increasingly connected and issue-savvy youth. The impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on education have become the trigger point for change. Chris Green, a specialist in educational reform, says it’s time to turn our backs on the neoliberal constructs that define the current ranking-fixated education system, and devise a more values-based education system on exploration, moral and ethical rigour, and critical thinking.

It is fair to say that school education was among the sectors most severely affected by the COVID-19 pandemic. In all but a handful of instances, school education requires face-to-face interaction, something national governments discouraged in the face of the virus. As a result, according to the UN, the pandemic impacted more than 91% of students worldwide. Damaging though that may have been for educators and learners, given how schools adapted, it probably accelerated calls for systemic changes in curriculum content design away from an increasingly outdated political and economic policy model. One education specialist says a post-pandemic education system should focus less on rankings, be more values-based, and give energy to curricula integration and teaching based on exploration, moral and ethical rigour, and critical thinking.

Chris Green really knows systems, schools and classrooms; they are in his veins. He has directed educational research for the past 20 years in areas such as curriculum structures and the development of educational landscapes of social and economic influence and virtual learning. Green is passionate about developing educational systems that continuously adapt to the needs of their communities, and right now, he says, education systems are disconnected from the emerging global landscapes of social and economic influence and virtual learning. He writes that these faults can be traced back to Western political and economic philosophies dominant in the 1970s, the seeding of the neoliberal age.

NEOLIBERALISM TO SUSTAINABILITY?

In the late 1970s, like the US and much of Europe, England lived in the shadow of significant economic uncertainty. Many countries have joined the race, for example the Gulf Cooperation Council countries of Bahrain and the UAE. When the UAE launched its National Agenda 2031, it declared education a prime focus for economic development, using OECD performance ranking explicitly. It even pointed to two key metrics saying that, by 2021, the UAE would feature in the top twenty countries in the Programmes for International Student Assessment (PISA) test and in the top fifteen countries in the Trends in Mathematics and Science Studies (TIMSS) test.

The COVID-19 pandemic arrived on the world stage in March 2020 and was accompanied by calls for education to be influential in the fight against the virus. As a result, according to the UN, the pandemic impacted more than 91% of students worldwide. Damaging though that may have been for educators and learners, given how schools adapted, it probably accelerated calls for systemic changes in curriculum content design away from an increasingly outdated political and economic policy model. One education specialist says a post-pandemic education system should focus less on rankings, be more values-based, and give energy to curricula integration and teaching based on exploration, moral and ethical rigour, and critical thinking.

The current urgencies around tackling climate change have also been driven to a large degree by an increasingly connected and issue-savvy youth. It was this same youth that bore the brunt of the impact of COVID-19 on their education, and the same youth that adapted. If the values of this youth are broadly incompatible with the anachronistic ideals of neoliberalism, a radical rethink in education is well overdue.

There is an emerging sense that the education ‘new normal’ brought about by the COVID-19 pandemic provides an opportunity for much-needed transformational change. That change will need to reflect the evident religious, moral, social, and cultural shifts currently underway. A firm emphasis on learning through thinking skills is important to bring objectivity and more honesty in communication. It is through thinking laden with human values that we develop empathy, courage, resilience, altruism, peace, generosity, and justice. Ask yourself if those values align with the neoliberal traits currently embedded in school curricula-instructional design.

However, a ‘moral education’ doesn’t come pre-packed as a subject add-on or a tweak to specific teaching units. Instead, it requires a deep, conscious focus on values throughout every aspect of a school’s work. It needs to be systemic, not a compartmentalised addressing of failures within the curricula. Much quasi-political resistance can be anticipated. Critics will argue there is simply too much complexity in the system for dramatic change. There is some truth to that. With so many separately taught, ‘quantitatively’ assessed and ‘valuability-ranked’ subjects crowding the curriculum, timetables have become tightly inflexible. Leaders feel too impeded by the tyranny of metrics to drive transformational change.

GUIDANCE AND MODELS FOR CHANGE

If the pandemic has provided a guiding light for curricula redesign, it sits in the UN’s 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. This states that by 2030 all learners should acquire the knowledge and skills needed to promote sustainable development and sustainable lifestyles, including human rights, gender equality, promotion of a culture of peace and non-violence, global citizenship, and appreciation of cultural diversity. This requires people

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to be educated in how to think critically about the knowledge and experiences that shape their lives; and importantly, how to apply that thinking from a diverse values base in whatever strata of community they belong. This may seem utopian, but ideals are not impractical – change models currently exist in many good schools.

So where to start? Educational theory basically consists of two major components: ‘what to learn’ – curriculum and knowledge; and ‘how to learn’ – instruction and teaching. Well-known curriculum-instructional models bridge subjects, explore cross-curricular commonality, and encourage thinking and values-based learning. Scaffolding is already widespread in bringing together curriculum and instruction, and teachers. The main problem is that ‘rigour’ and ‘relevant application’. For students, such scaffolding helps them to recognise and use their cognitive levels of thinking in practice. For adults and teachers, the scaffolding is about: 1) designing teaching for flexible, differentiated learning; 2) collaborative evaluation (rather than ranking results from commercial examinations and tests); 3) using evaluations to aid students’ transition from dependency to independence; and 4) adjusting support (from adults and peers) throughout transitions.

Frameworks exist that can clearly liberate thinking zones of ‘rigour’ and ‘open’ curriculum and pedagogical progression with accountability and value-added designs with relationships at their core are overdue. 

‘Market-based illusions have seemingly inhibited relevant curriculum design and honest approaches to assessment, teaching and learning key curriculum objectives and instructional designs, and ask themselves whether these represent what young people need or whether they are relics of another time.

An era for ethical school self-evaluation based on chosen value-based content and practice, controversial as that may be, appears to be dawning well beyond the metrics of neoliberalism currently embedded. Normalisation based on replacing judgements acquired by personal experience with numerical indicators of performance from dubious algorithms is passé. New normalisation is required that assures the public that schools are actually carrying out their true purposes.

Challenges of teaching and learning key curriculum objectives and instructional concepts drawn together in blended styles. In response to the contemporary demands of a ‘savvy youth’, for me the starting point is understandable the current limitations of the market-driven normalisation of schools and exploring the possibilities of fresh, but existing, approaches more honestly to provide for the common good.

Rethinking current education paradigms and promoting a system based on values, inquiry, analysis, and critical synthesis.

Chris is Executive Director of GES World Ltd. Formerly a statutory chief education officer, he has led strategic government-affiliated school improvement in England, Bahrain, and the UAE. Developing approaches to accelerate students’ progress through effective curricula-teaching designs also include applications in Saudi Arabia, the USA, India, Tanzania, and China.

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The cycle of curriculum and pedagogical interrelatedness. Here the cube encourages consideration of ‘open’ curriculum progression with ‘relevant’ instructional devices. Its fluidity includes the necessary axes for graduating accountability and assessment but moves away from the metrics fixation of linear ranking of scores. Learning how to think critically requires constant adjustment to changing contexts and relationships. The model of teachers commenting on conventional subject matter from the front of the class is no longer fit for purpose – and perhaps never was. Most teachers know this and adapt curriculum materials more towards a ‘thinking and doing pedagogy’.

Internet reveals that thousands of schools have re-worked Bloom’s taxonomy of human cognition and translated these into thinking zones of ‘rigour’ and ‘relevant application’. The term ‘rapidly-changing world’ may seem trite, but it’s increasingly difficult to argue that the current education system in most countries is still fit for equipping young people for what awaits them. The groundswells of public activism over the past few years are evidence of a moral shift, especially in young people’s thinking. These highlight an overdue need for politicians and educators to critically examine the authenticity, relevance, and quality of current curricula and instructional designs, and ask themselves whether these represent what young people need or whether they are relics of another time.

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Personal Response
You’re calling for systemic change. That will take time, so where is a good place to start?

Yes, it will take time. Schools themselves have demonstrated great dexterity in adjusting to the challenges of teaching and learning key curriculum objectives and instructional concepts drawn together in blended styles. In response to the contemporary demands of a ‘savvy youth’, for me the starting point is understanding the current limitations of the market-driven normalisation of schools and exploring the possibilities of fresh, but existing, approaches more honestly to provide for the common good.