Austerity and inequality; or prosperity for all? Educational policy directions beyond the pandemic

Andy Hargreaves^{1,2}

Received: 17 August 2020 / Accepted: 30 September 2020 / Published online: 3 December 2020
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Abstract

This paper draws on current international analysis of pandemic issues in education, and on recent arguments by critical economists and political scientists, to examine two scenarios for educational policy beyond the coronavirus pandemic. One looming possibility is an onrush of austerity, deep cuts to public education, financial hardship for the working and middle classes, and a range of private sector, including online answers to public problems in education, leading to more inequity, and an even wider digital divide. The pandemic, it is argued, is already being used as a strategy to bring about educational privatization by stealth by mismanaging return-to-school strategies and by overselling the effectiveness of online and private school alternatives. The alternative is public education investment to pursue prosperity and better quality of life for everyone. This will reduce inequality instead of increasing it, close the digital divide that COVID-19 has exposed, and encourage *balanced* technology use to enhance good teaching rather than *hybrid* or *blended* technology delivery that may increasingly replace such teaching.

Keywords Pandemic · Coronavirus · Technology · Education policy · Economics · Privatization · Austerity

1 Introduction

We are not yet through the First Wave of COVID-19, but policymakers and school leaders are already starting to look toward the end of the tunnel. They are not just trying to glimpse the light. They are also seeking to grasp exactly what might be beyond the darkness and figure out which way to turn.

For many—the elderly in care homes, the essential workers who have been financially forced to continue working in unsafe factories, the migrant farmworkers of the UK and North America housed in overcrowded breeding grounds for infection, and all the parents who have

✉ Andy Hargreaves
andrew.hargreaves@bc.edu

¹ Boston College, Chestnut Hill, USA

² University of Ottawa, Ottawa, Canada

had to do their jobs at home while caring for, managing, and trying to supervise the learning of their children, the pandemic has been a once-in-a-century kind of chaos.

Once it is all over, what comes next? To turn one way might be to face an onrush of austerity, deep cuts to public services, another round of financial hardship for the working and middle classes, and a range of private sector, including online answers to profoundly public problems in education, more inequity, and an even wider digital divide.

There is another path we can take, though. Instead of austerity, we can embrace economic expansion in public education investment to pursue prosperity and better quality of life for everyone. We can reduce inequality instead of increasing it, we can close the digital divide that COVID-19 has exposed, and we can use balanced technology to enhance good teaching rather than blended or hybrid technology to replace it.

2 Austerity or prosperity

Across the world, many policymakers and international policy organizations are already concerned that once the peak of the coronavirus crisis has passed, public education funding, like government funding in general, may be plunged into years of austerity that will hurt the poor, and the children of the poor, the most.

Austerity, though, is neither inevitable nor desirable. Speaking after the global economic crisis of 2008, President Clinton's former Secretary of Labor, Robert Reich, insisted that austerity economics was a "dangerous nonsense," a "false snake oil" for "saving the economy by killing it" (O'Hara 2014). Austerity, he demonstrated, had only exacerbated poverty and suffering and increased inequality, because "95% of the economic gains since the recovery began in 2009 have gone to the top 1%." Indeed, the US's weak political response to the novel coronavirus is itself partly a consequence of years of underfunding and austerity in public health. (Ludwig 2020).

Leading economists agree with Reich. Mariana Mazzucato, prize-winning author of *The Value of Everything* (Mazzucato 2018), warns against "renewed austerity to reduce the enormous debt-to-GDP ratios" that will arise from current government borrowing (Eaton 2020). It is government, not the private sector, which will mainly generate new value, she says, by creating jobs, expanding public health and other public services, and ending the digital divide. Indeed, it is strong, well-funded governments, like Norway, South Korea, New Zealand, and Canada that have made the most decisive, collaborative, transparent, and coherent responses to the pandemic crisis. This is the approach that post-pandemic education strategies will require too.

Kate Raworth (2017), inventor of the much acclaimed theory of *Doughnut Economics*, amplifies a gathering chorus of critics of conventional economics in saying there is more to human existence than GDP (Gross Domestic Product). Heather Boushey (2019), one of the economic advisers to US President elect, Joe Biden, joins with Raworth, Reich, and Mazzucatto in arguing that even in times of plenty, the pursuit of endless economic growth as the prime measure of improvement for a society and its economy has been misguided. In *Unbound: How Inequality Constricts Our Economy and What We Can Do About It*, Boushey points out the injustice of a strategy that since 1980 has quadrupled the post-tax income of the top 0.1% while workers at the 40th percentile (a position occupied by many office workers, care home workers and kindergarten teachers) increased their incomes in real terms by just 0.3% (Boushey 2019, p. 5). Alongside the injustice, is sheer inefficiency. Citing the *International Monetary Fund*, Boushey notes that "when growth takes place in societies

with high inequality, the economic gains are more likely to be destroyed by the more severe recessions and depressions that follow” (Boushey 2019, p. 8).

Austerity is the obverse of growth. It is usually introduced after a depression or recession, as in 2008. But there are exceptions. Believers in small government, lower taxes, and reduced public expenditure, including in education, have sometimes introduced austerity in times of plenty. In *Dying of Whiteness*, physician and author Jonathan Metzl (2019) reports interviews in 2017 with working class voters in America’s Heartland, including Kansas. As recently as 2007–2008, Kansas was a high performing state, with 4th grade reading and mathematics achievements well above the national average. By 2016, though, it had dropped into the bottom quartile of US states on many indicators of educational success. A 2017 *Kansas Association of School Boards* report noted that “Over the past 8 years, the percent of Kansas students scoring at the basic and proficient benchmarks have generally declined, while peer states and the US average have generally improved.” (Metzl 2019, p. 245). High school graduation rates fell, dropout rates rose, and it was minority and white working class students who were affected the most. As Metzl notes, these trends in high school underachievement have severe lifelong consequences for health and mortality that can be measured in years of life.

What was the cause of all this? In times of plenty, the state’s Governor imposed sweeping measures of austerity to eliminate as much government as possible from people’s lives. A 2012 Bill introduced the largest income tax cuts in the state’s history with the greatest tax revenue losses occurring at the top end of the income scale. A school finance bill allowed districts to hire unlicensed teachers for science and mathematics, reduced support for vulnerable students, and provided tax breaks for corporations that donated to private school scholarships. Block funding was introduced that removed weighting in favor of disadvantaged students.

The consequences manifested themselves in larger class sizes, rising fees for kindergarten, and the removal of many programs, especially in the arts, health education, and other areas. “Minority and low-income families regressively paid more taxes and sent their children to worsening schools” (Boushey 2019, p. 214) in order to support huge financial gains for the well off. In this respect, Kansas has been part of a much bigger national and global pattern where, over the last four decades, wealth has percolated upward from the lowest to the highest echelons of society.

3 Austerity and technology

Whether in times of shortage or plenty, taxing more income and cutting government services like public education to build up GDP is therefore not the best policy. The greatest source of inequality, economists like the ones I have discussed point out, is not income, but wealth. Just 1% of the world’s population—that includes leading digital tech billionaires—own more than 50% of it. Removing international tax havens and low-tax/no-tax corporate economies that allow tech giants to base their operations there and avoid paying taxes in the countries and states where they trade will generate billions in revenue, Raworth (2017) argues. Tech giants depended on government funding to start up their innovations, she points out, so they should now give back what is the government’s due. This will enable political leaders to switch their focus from higher and higher GDP in order to generate more taxable income of the 99% (in ways that also shield the wealth of the super-rich), to improving everyone’s quality of life, she says.

Just imagine if we had a global movement that successfully urged the Big Five tech giants of Apple, Microsoft, Google, Amazon, and Facebook, to give a tiny fraction of all revenue accruing from their internet traffic as a levy to the governments where they trade or to United Nations operations supporting children's health and education. Or imagine if they just paid fair corporate taxes? What a difference that could make to the post-COVID recovery! Rather than having a *digital divide*, we would get a *digital dividend* to improve quality of life for everyone. In Norway and Alaska, a share of oil revenues goes back to all citizens. Why not have a digital dividend that can benefit everyone too?

Even a year ago, this may have sounded like a farfetched ambition, but the appearance of the CEOs of the Big Five Tech titans before a US Congressional Committee in July 2020 to address concerns about antitrust monopolization of operations before and during the pandemic when their online profits skyrocketed is a sign of growing pressures for them to share their wealth (Naughton 2020). It may be the beginning of a movement for these companies with massive involvement in and control of educational technology before and after the pandemic to pay their tax dues to the societies that financially supported and provided infrastructure for their original innovative efforts. This would be more publicly responsible than channeling profits into personal gain and tax-subsidized philanthropy (Giridharadas 2019).

4 From austerity to prosperity

The alternative to austerity is *prosperity*. We usually understand prosperity to mean great fortune, especially in financial terms. But the Latin origin of *prosperous* is, simply, “doing well.” Prosperity is, at root, about “a successful, flourishing, or thriving condition.”¹

Some of the world's most inspiring women leaders such as Jacinda Ardern of New Zealand and Katrín Jakobsdóttir of Iceland, are following the lead of female economists like Raworth, Boushey, and Mazzucato in giving primacy to quality of life alongside and even ahead of economic growth. First Minister (equivalent to Prime Minister) Nicola Sturgeon of Scotland spoke for all of them when she said that “The goal and objective of all economic policy should be collective wellbeing...to create a world that considers the quality of a person's life to be as precious an asset as financial success” (Scottish Government 2020).

In Canada, for example, Finance Minister, Chrystia Freeland (2012), has drawn attention to how the heightened regulation of its banking systems compared to other nations where financial elites have pared regulations back to their own advantage, cushioned Canada and all its citizens from the global economic collapse and from the depths of austerity into which all the other advanced economies sank. Canada was the only one of the G7 group of nations that did not have to bail out its banks with government money.

Canada is not a perfect country, of course. It has only a middling performance on adolescent wellbeing (UNICEF 2013). But it has universal, single-payer, public healthcare, whereas its neighbors on its southern border do not. Chances of upward social mobility are much higher than the USA or UK (Major and Machin 2018). Compared to the USA, Canada has superior provisions for parental leave and early childhood education, it has one of the highest ranked public education systems outside Asia, and its private school sector is very small (Hargreaves and Shirley 2012). Based on many indicators that are business-related, in January 2020, it was ranked by *US News and World Report* as the second best country in the world to live. In general, public investment leads to public good, quality of life, and economic prosperity.

¹ <https://www.dictionary.com/browse/prosperity>.

Now is not the time for imposing austerity in government spending on public education and other public services. After all the sacrifices that everyday citizens and essential workers have made during the pandemic, it is a time to build prosperity in everyone's quality of life and invest in more jobs and sources of support in public education.

First, investing in the public sector will help rebuild the economy. The public sector is not a drain on GDP but an active contributor to it, not least through the jobs and income it provides that then have a multiplier effect in generating spending that boosts the consumer sector (Mazzucato 2018).

Second, investing in the public sector will provide invaluable help for vast numbers of vulnerable students who will return to school with mental health issues due to social isolation and to sometimes being confined for long periods with families at a time when there have been increases in child custody battles, escalating rates of domestic violence, and problems of poverty and basic food security (Hargreaves 2020c). All this is in addition to the losses of learning that have occurred among many students after spending months at home.

Last, investing in the public sector will actually increase equity and opportunity by providing state employment that is often the first step-up for young people from disadvantaged families because it does not depend on inside networks among privileged families working in the private sector. As I explain in my memoir of education and social mobility, *Moving* (Hargreaves 2020a), and as social mobility experts Stephen Machin and Lee Elliott Major demonstrate in their analysis of social mobility trends, strong public sectors increase rates of social mobility by offering middle class jobs based on objective accomplishment. Weak public sectors, including ones resulting from austerity policies, mean that middle class opportunities are more numerous in the private sector with all its insider connections that are leveraged by privileged families (Major and Machin 2018).

For the sake of their mental health and their learning, children need to go back to school as soon as they safely can. And their parents need to be able to go back to work too. But, once the basic rates of infection have been reduced to manageable levels and children and their families are no longer at serious physical risk, then we need investment so they can return to school properly. This investment will enable additional space to be acquired in universities, offices, community centers, and churches, so children can be taught in smaller groups with sufficient social distancing—half the class sizes, twice the space. And extra counselors, social workers, graduate students, and teachers in training will be able to manage the greater numbers of groups and support the most vulnerable (Campbell et al. 2020).

Forcing children back to school in unsafe circumstances by threatening withdrawal of Federal funding for states that do not comply in the USA (Shapiro 2020), or by proposing to issue fines to parents who do not send their children to school in England, for example, is a callous strategy of placing immediate economic confidence before support for health protection for students and their teachers (Coughlan 2020). If prosperity in the fullest sense is our goal, then austerity cannot be the answer.

5 Private gain or public good

The prospect of immediate and ensuing austerity in education budgets is happening alongside advocacy for yet more school choice and channeling of public money to charter schools and religious schools as well as to online alternatives to physical schools. For example, US school districts have been ordered by Federal Government “to set aside a portion of their aid for

private schools using a formula based on the total number of private school students in the district” (Binkley 2020).

Even in high-performing Canada, which has a very tiny private sector and a miniscule number of charter schools, opinion pieces have surfaced like one in a leading national newspaper that criticizes the “local public school, like it or lump it” for dissatisfied parents during the pandemic and advocates government subsidized private schools of choice to operate as alternatives—even though no convincing evidence is provided that their results would be superior (Selley 2020).

These moves to expand, restore, or insert political agendas of educational privatization during the novel coronavirus are most evident in the proposals to expand the use of digital technologies outside and sometimes instead of physical schools after the pandemic (Strauss 2020). Ironically, though, while remote learning through digital technology has proved to be one of the greatest failures of learning at home during the pandemic, it is curiously being placed at the very center of a global campaign for a new, high-tech normal after the pandemic. Transformational learning and a reimagined educational system are being heralded as offering learning anytime, anywhere, in hybrid and blended forms (Fullan et al. 2020).

As I argue more extensively elsewhere, digital technology has undoubtedly been a life-saver for many young people and their parents in a way that would have been unthinkable two decades ago before Google, Skype and Zoom (Hargreaves 2020b). And there are many ways in which technology can and should offer unique value in making improvements that have been difficult to achieve in any other way—supporting students with special educational needs, enabling teachers in remote schools to collaborate with peers elsewhere, and transforming assessments from industrial-age standardized tests to providing and circulating real-time continuous assessment feedback, for example. We need to strive not just to get more technology by the back door through expanding *blended* delivery, but to evaluate what a *balanced* approach to technology looks like that considers unique benefits alongside active strategies to mitigate risks.

During the pandemic, though, apart from some students with Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) who get to move around more at home, or students who have been targets of bullying in schools, or private school students whose online teaching that has not had to be accommodated to the larger and more economically diverse classes typical of public schools, online learning has generally suffered. This is because of digital divides of access, student exposure to excess screen time, working parents who have found it hard to provide adequate supervision of their children’s learning, students in larger families with only one or two devices and little or no access to printers, and distractibility of infants and teenagers alike in the overcrowded, at-home, online learning environment. Necessity has been the mother of digital educational invention. But we are now in serious danger of making a dubious virtue out of this temporary necessity.

6 Conclusion

An unholy trinity of austerity, overzealous advocacy for any and all technology, and educational privatization is presenting a formidable challenge and threat to the entire future of public education as something that inclusively serves the common good.

The alternative to austerity is prosperity where quality of life for all is paramount and investment in public education in the wake of the pandemic will support the most vulnera-

ble students, provide jobs and economic regeneration, and protect disadvantaged students' opportunities for upward social mobility.

A balanced approach to digital technology can and should be enthusiastically supported where it genuinely enriches quality teaching and learning, and where it provides unique or superior value that cannot be offered in any other way. As my colleagues and I in our newly established CHENINE Centre (Change Engagement and Innovation in Education) at the University of Ottawa state in our *Chenine Charter*, out-of-school, after-school, digital technology for learning should also be made available not as a privately afforded option, but as a public, universal, human right (CHENINE 2020). Technology in education should not be a tool of digital zealotry where learning is provided anywhere, anytime, for anyone, no matter how variable the quality is. If there is one thing we have learned from the pandemic in education, it is how much we need physical schools in the here and now—to care for the vulnerable, provide inclusive opportunity, build community, and be places for children to go to so their parents can go to work.

Last, the pandemic is already being used as a strategy to introduce and expand educational privatization by stealth, by mismanaging return-to-school strategies, and by overselling the effectiveness of online alternatives. In the midst of the overwhelming pressures of the coronavirus pandemic, we must remain vigilant that governments and other organizations do not use this to create a degraded public system that becomes eroded by disinvestment and privatization.

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