



A global reset of education

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Abstract As the world looks to the future and ways to safely return to normal, in light of the Covid-19 pandemic, we have a unique opportunity to reset our priorities and redefine what this normal looks like. For education communities, this is a chance to take a close look at aspects of education systems that we have taken for granted for far too long.

Keywords Learning · COVID-19 · Crisis

There are very few elements of human life that remain unaffected by the Covid-19 pandemic. Across the world we have entered into lockdowns, adapted our working lives or stopped them completely, changed our habits, and missed our families and friends. Perhaps one of the most remarkable effects of the pandemic has been the mass closure of physical schools, the impact of which has been felt by educators, parents and children globally. At the start of the lockdowns I began speaking to families around the world to find out how they were coping and to share their stories in order to let others know they were not alone – to show that while aspects of this situation may be unique in living history, and of course every family’s situation is unique, we are going through this together.

Now as lockdowns are easing, or in some places being abandoned all together (the effects of which we will learn in time), people are naturally looking to the future and to ways in which we might safely return to normal. The most important questions to ask are what type of normal do we want to get back to, and is it the normal that we have left behind us? I believe that it should not be, and that we are at an exceptional moment in time to redirect our course.

As the science community continues to gain insight into the virus itself, it is clear that this pandemic has been largely of our own making. Humanity has created conditions on earth that are hostile to our best interests and counterproductive to our

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collective wellbeing. As a species we are facing two major crises. The first is the climate crisis, which was there long before the pandemic began and which is still waiting to be adequately addressed. If we do not approach the climate crisis as the emergency that it is, we will find ourselves facing extinction. People talk a lot about saving the planet, but what they mean by that is saving our existence on it. Only we can do that, and we must. The second crisis is in our ways of life through normalising stress, anxiety, and toxic patterns of behaviour. These two crises are deeply connected. Our neglect for our relationship with the natural world is as detrimental to our own wellbeing as it is to the planet. We can take lessons from one and apply them to the other.

Most mass systems of education evolved from the 18th century and were modelled on the process of Industrialism. The Industrial Revolution redefined normal. The progress it made to manufacturing and technology created lasting change on agriculture. Mechanization made it possible to plough huge tracts of land, which yielded great monocultures – vast fields of one type of crop. Chemical fertilizers were introduced at scale, to “protect” the crops in these unnatural environments from the natural ecosystems that gravitate towards them, and in doing so devastated food chains of insects that feed on the crops and small animals and birds that feed on the insects. The overwhelming priority of the industrial agriculture was on increasing output and it has been highly successful in terms of yield, but a catastrophe for the health of the planet. Topsoils have been eroded, ecosystems destroyed, habitats depleted, waters polluted, and species brought to extinction.

There are alternatives to these industrial systems of farming. The key difference in organic or sustainable approaches to farming is that they focus on diversity of crops, on growing them in close proximities, and on encouraging the natural ecosystems that depend on them. Rather than focusing on the plant itself, they focus on the soil. By creating the right conditions for growth, the yield takes care of itself and all the ecosystems that depend on the yield thrive too.

There are strong parallels between these two opposite approaches to farming and our social systems, in particular our education systems. They resemble, in many key respects, the algorithms and principles of standardization and of factory life. All too often we educate our children through systems that are designed to focus on output, on yield. We prioritize test data, scores, graduation rates, college admission and degrees. Human beings are like the rest of life on Earth – we flourish under certain conditions, and we wither under others.

Much like agricultural systems that thrive due to the soil, our communities, cities, neighbourhoods, schools and people thrive when the culture is right. This is something that great educators and schools understand – an education system is not successful because of tests and output-driven hurdles, it is successful when individuals are recognized, and diversity of talent is celebrated. It is successful when students are fulfilled. Rather than raising generations of monocultures, we must encourage a mixed culture within our schools, of the sciences, the arts, technology, of individual passions and the unique pathways they each determine, and the interconnectedness of our human ecosystems.

One key takeaway from this pandemic is how fundamentally we rely on these ecosystems. In addition to the virus itself, the great suffering of this pandemic has been isolation and loneliness. While an essential part of stopping the spread, isolation has led to a sharp rise in mental health problems and depression. We have also seen a rise in creative pursuits from painting, to music, to collaboration on joint projects. We have found original and fulfilling ways to connect through available technologies – musicians have performed together from their individual living rooms in different parts of the world, dance companies have

collaborated and minds have come together to discuss everything from the pandemic to politics to popular culture. We have been shown the importance of connection through the lens of our common humanity, and we must never forget how vital that is.

As we have pressed pause on many of our social systems, it is time to press reset on them as well. I mentioned earlier that I have been speaking to families around the world to discuss their situations and how they are coping. The most successful examples are where parents have not felt the need to replicate school directly. Where they have encouraged cross-age learning amongst siblings or other family members, where they have embellished the basic assignments by adding creative elements or bringing them to life in ways that are relative to their children.

Learning is the most natural process in the world. Human beings are highly creative, deeply compassionate and naturally collaborative. What school shutdowns have shown us is that we have come to think of schools as particular types of places. There is no need for schools to be that way. We can reinvent schools, we can revitalize learning, and we can reignite the creative compassion of our communities, if we think differently.

We can do this by working together, by continuing to build on collaborations that began during lockdowns. Real social change comes from the ground up, through cultivating the grassroots. Real power is with the people. By recognizing that and by nurturing compassionate collaboration we can redesign and rebuild our normal in a way that is fit for purpose – for both our wellbeing as a species, and the wellbeing of the planet we call home.

As long as humans have walked the Earth, we have created ideas about the world – we have languages through which we express our feelings and communicate with each other, we create works of art, scientific theories and philosophies. No other species, as far as we are aware, does these things. Through the horror and tragedy of the pandemic we have an opportunity to use these human superpowers to reset, to realize a future for ourselves and the generations to come that reflects the very best of humanity. To create a new sort of world, and a new kind of normal that generations to follow will add to and shape for themselves. It starts with education, it always has done.

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Sir Ken Robinson is a British author, speaker, and international advisor on education to government, non-profits, education, and arts bodies. A visionary cultural leader, Sir Ken led the British government's 1998 advisory committee on creative and cultural education, a massive inquiry into the significance of creativity in the educational system and the economy, and was knighted in 2003 for his achievements. The embodiment of the prestigious TED Conference and its commitment to spreading new ideas, Sir Ken Robinson is the most watched speaker in TED's history. His 2006 talk, "Do Schools Kill Creativity", has been viewed online over 60 million times and seen by an estimated 380 million people in 160 countries.