Pandemic education

Henk ten Have¹

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The contributions in this issue illustrate the broad scope of the journal. It covers teaching in business ethics, medical ethics, humanities, environmental studies and bioethics. Reported studies are from Ethiopia, Nigeria, Morocco, Australia and New Zealand, United Kingdom, Greece and the United States. Moreover, contributions discuss various methodologies such as team-teaching and the use of cinema. Given the current pandemic of Covid-19 it was expected that scholars will examine the impact of the global infectious disease on education. In this issue, Mohamed Abioui and colleagues point out that lockdown measures led to closure of schools and universities in most countries across the globe, with the result that students and teachers are confined at home. To guarantee continuity of education, distance learning is promoted, but as the authors show, especially in the Global South this is not a viable option, for example because access to electricity is lacking. Even in the Global North, when technical facilities are available, online learning is problematic especially when the entire family is sheltering at home. Since teachers can pay less attention to individual pupils, existing inequalities are reinforced. In general, Abioui and colleagues conclude that nothing can replace the face to face interaction between teacher and students (Abioui et al. 2020). It is therefore understandable that there is pressure to reopen schools as soon as possible. However, reopening without sufficient precautions will risk to reignite the dissemination of the virus. This risk is real as is illustrated in the case of several universities that have started in-person classes but had to discontinue them because of resurgence of infections. Even if it is argued that young people are suffering less from Covid-19, there still is the need to protect the teachers. Government efforts to reopen schools and universities should therefore be associated with adequate public health measures such as rapid testing, face masks and physical distancing.

Besides the impact of Covid-19 on education, another question concerns the potential significance of education for the pandemic. As long as there is no efficient vaccine or adequate therapy, public health interventions will much depend on education and information of the general public. It is striking that in countries with highly educated populations fake news and misconceptions circulate widely. For example, in the

✉ Henk ten Have
henktenhave10@gmail.com

¹ Center for Healthcare Ethics, Duquesne University, Pittsburgh, PA, USA

Netherlands one in ten people believe conspiracy theories: the virus is fabricated by the Chinese government or pharmaceutical companies; a future vaccine will implant a chip to continuously monitor people. False messages are shared on social media: tests will damage the blood-brain barrier; face masks are dangerous because they restrict oxygenation; radiation of 5G technology is causing Covid-19. Such messages are sometimes actively supported by scientists and politicians. Conspiracy theories have always been flourishing during pandemics in the past. Specific populations have been blamed and scapegoated. The plague in 1924 in Los Angeles was regarded as a Hispanic problem and the Mexican quarter was sealed off by armed guards. Legionnaires' disease in 1976 was attributed to communist terrorists. AIDS was initially framed as a disease of gay lifestyles while SARS was viewed as a Chinese plague. Treatment of Ebola in 2014 was resisted since it was regarded as a government plot to attract foreign aid or as a product of the US military. Not too long ago, in 2015, people believed that the Zika epidemic was due to insecticides or the rubella vaccine (Honigsbaum 2020). Fear, distress and anxiety promote the search for explanations; people need interpretations of frightening experiences. What is new, is the facility and scale of communicating information, true or false. Conspiracy theorists can mobilize many people in a short time, create an atmosphere of distrust, and put blame of others, especially in contexts where racism, xenophobia and discrimination are already prevailing. This highlights the responsibility of politicians and scientists. It emphasizes the importance of honesty and integrity, even when these values are nowadays under stress. Ultimately, it requires the persistence of educational efforts and particularly the importance of the teaching of ethics.

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