

## Will school (ing) ever change? School culture, distance learning and the COVID-19 pandemic

by Piotr Mikiewicz, Marta Jurczak-Morris

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The educational sector has never witnessed an unprecedented crisis that has dramatically transformed its landscape like COVID-19 has done. The pandemic constituted a substantial challenge for schools, educators, and students alike to remain resilient and committed to ensure continuity all around the globe. Without any predefined agenda to address the requirements of this urgent situation, school boards sought alternative methods to suddenly shift from presential instruction to online and distance learning. Although COVID-19 pandemic has disrupted education and resulted in negative outcomes and an array of pitfalls, the pandemic also affords potential opportunities to reflect and rethink current practices to seek innovative approaches and insights. The book entitled *Will Schooling Ever Change? School Culture, Distance Learning and the COVID-19 Pandemic* by Piotr Mikiewicz and Marta Jurczak-Morris is a long-awaited book that provides a retrospective overview of the functioning of the school system including (governments, school administrations, teachers, students, parents and educational organisations), reflects on unexpected challenges during crises and underscores prospective endeavours that may/ may not take place in school culture in post-pandemic era, and how school culture is resistant to change. This book, with its theoretical preliminaries, is particularly aimed at educators, researchers and academics who are willing to consolidate their knowledge about the crisis of educational provision throughout the lockdown of COVID-19 pandemic in light of the sociology of education approaches and analyses.

The introductory chapter offers a much-needed landscape of Education During the Time of the

Pandemic. The first part of the chapter highlights how COVID-19 has impacted humanity in every aspect including the dramatic death toll, a deterioration of mental health, social distancing and lockdowns, financial instability, educational disruption and school closures worldwide, which in fact, resulted in an abrupt shift from face-to-face delivery to distance, virtual education. This digital transformation has changed the traditional school culture at the level of setting, time, and daily routines; moreover, new modes of defining the pedagogical relation between teachers and pupils significantly emerged essentially synchronous, asynchronous, blended and hybrid learning respectively. In this respect, it is crucial to maintain teacher-learner interaction and feedback; furthermore, the learners should have the opportunity to work on their task individually or with their peers and present their work virtually for further feedforward from the teacher.

The second part of the chapter captures the responsive measures taken by two different case studies who vary at several levels: the Polish and the British educational systems to address the technical and organizational requirements during the pandemic namely the closures' duration and the implemented forms of instruction i.e face-to-face provision versus learning from home, amount of time allotted to remote and school learning in primary, secondary and tertiary level, and the status quo of digital learning (Eg., digital competency and access, home learning space, school digital adequacy, internet connection, ICT staff, and teacher digital training and lesson planning). Mikiewicz and Jurczak-Morris underline the reliance on asynchronous approach at the outset of the

pandemic, then a gradual transition towards synchronous learning through platforms, and finally a combination of both modes within the third wave of COVID-19 across Polish schools. In British school, school websites posted learning and online materials and downloadable packs in addition to applications. Later on, synchronous and asynchronous teaching took place. One major remark is that private schools, in Britain, outperformed public school at the provision of regularly synchronous sessions and emphasis on the learners' collaboration and technological support. It is evident that official exams were massively interrupted by the pandemic in both countries with regard to General Certificate of Secondary Education (GCSE) and A-level; however, responsive actions differed. The British government cancelled both exams, and a new grading system was introduced in July 2020. In January 2021, the exams were cancelled; instead, the teachers were responsible of assessing their students' performance. Polish pupils sit for their exams throughout the pandemic in strictly sanitary measures while the oral exams were cancelled.

The digital competency and online pedagogy constituted the major challenges for teachers since they lack remote teaching skills. In this prospect, the authors pinpoint the factors that accompanied the whole process of online teaching including time-management skills, workload, assessment, and a lack of students' self-regulation skills, intrinsic motivation and autonomy. Gradually, the teachers supported each other to develop their digital competency with the majority of teachers still preferred face-to-face teaching. The same section emphasises the students' positive and negative experiences of remote learning at the level of attainment, physical versus online learning, time flexibility, and freedom of expression. Furthermore, head teachers struggled with interpreting and implementing the guidelines of the governments' decisions, and at times, felt helpless since they needed clarity and relevant pedagogical and psychological support to resume teaching in time of crisis. Moreover, British parents responded to the fears about their children's learning loss by purchasing learning materials to consolidate their learning. The parents' social class and educational background were decisive factors in the allotted time and quality of children's homeschooling. In Poland, the parents assumed the responsibility of homeschooling at first. Then the teachers opted for an intensive online testing scheme that affected the pupils' mental health. The final phase

witnessed the adoption of the traditional timetable in virtual sessions.

By reflecting on the school culture during the pandemic, major issues surfaced such as the digital divide that is systematic across British schools in which pupils in deprived areas suffered the most; however, in the Polish context, internet connectivity, the quality of equipment and the parents' technological capital and its role in advancing their children's remote learning. Assessment presented another challenge when teachers distrusted some students' performance on homework with regard to parents' involvement; furthermore, assessment was fundamentally about testing rather than advancing active learning and chaotic situation of online marking and reception of homework. Finally, parents were dissatisfied with assessment apropos learning loss, fairness and effectiveness. All of which negatively impacted the involved agents' mental health. Fundamentally, the pandemic highlighted the function of schools as childcare institutions, rather than educational ones in the first place gained momentum during the pandemic since schools have primarily taken care of children on behalf of their working parents. Finally, there was a discontent among citizens in both countries due to the governments' inability to communicate effectively about decision making particularly about addressing critical domains (Eg., education). Eventually, two paradoxes emerged through the implementation of remote learning. Though Britain is considered as the hub of EdTech in Europe, its schools were not digitally in command of the adequate pedagogical and methodological practices to ensure an effective distance learning; moreover, discourse about online remote learning was confusing and contradictory when labelling it as a chance and a crisis concurrently during the pandemic.

The second chapter *Schooling in its Essence* is organised thematically in three parts. The first part delves into providing a thorough historical account of the logic of establishing school(ing) as key institutions in the functioning of modern societies thanks to industrialisation and the need to form proficient workforce that is no longer dependent on the family's repertoire of knowledge in a society, but rather on mass education that promotes scientific, technical and professional development in which meritocracy and selection based on educational achievement and the attainment of degrees are its direct fundamental outputs. Simultaneously, it highlights the different organisations and functioning of schools and the role

of international organisations in evaluating the uniformity of their education; nevertheless, other actors have also a solid standpoint about the logic of school institutions namely the students, their parents, and the governments, which directly impacts the institutional rigidity and resistance to change.

The second part endeavours to scrutinise school education in light of the sociology of education with a specific emphasis on three orientations: structural-functional, conflict and interpretive. In this vein, a thorough explanation of the underpinning principles of each dimension is associated with the social field of education, and how they can be translated into three outcomes of shaping individuals' lives through education precisely: the socialisation theory, the allocative approach and the institutional authority of education respectively. Within these approaches, the authors elucidate their basic features in relation to the individual student within the community of school and society in general, the installation of individuals in the societal structures by means of selection and allocation that are chiefly the direct output of formal education and its formative and regulative missions, and eventually the consideration of schools as dependent social venues whose task is to produce subordinate workers in favour of a dominant elite group. Though the abovementioned orientations may diverge in theoretical foundations, they unveil the complexities of school education as a system driven by rules. In this prospect, the authors highlight the logic of schooling by narrowing it down into three research traditions: institutional, socialisation and allocation that are complementary in understanding the functioning of formal education across societies.

Fundamental to the understanding of the school culture is the inclusion of the context of the social system in which schools are organisations and components of a larger system; accordingly, the last part synthesises the reasons of the persistence of school culture in modern times when it pinpoints the universal pedagogical relation between the teacher and the students in a school as a physical place. Essentially, the authors categorise the milestones of the permanence of the teacher-student relationship to fulfil futuristic social, political and economic expectations through assessment, school relations and positions governed by rules and resources, which automatically establish routinisation, regionalisation, the maintenance of rituals, and the hidden programmes of daily school life.

The last chapter entitled Potential Direction of Change: Looking Forward offers a profound analytical account of the previous two chapters and underscores the fact that school (ing) is so entrenched in modern societies that it may seem utopian to change its underlying foundations and principles despite severe crises (eg., COVID-19). Accordingly, the authors' reflections foreground possible futuristic hypotheses for change in the school culture. To begin with, it is high time the agents of the pedagogical relationship i.e teachers and students navigated and consolidated their digital repertoire to address the requirements of potential recurring distance learning and the new roles they may assume to ultimately reach productive outputs for the parties involved. Furthermore, discourse around change in schooling focuses on three dimensions: regionalisation, timing and the hidden curriculum in which technological devices can be implemented to assist the teachers in their work and enhance the students' ability to seek knowledge autonomously, yet technology has not made a significant change in regard with the educational processes and the system of mass education since the school has been recognised, mainly after the pandemic, as a child caring institution where the children need to belong and learn in a wider community to be prepared for their future role in their societies. Similarly, as long as the schooling system is fundamentally based on the central agent (the teacher) and a key element (assessment), no profound change will ever take place in the universal functioning of schooling.

Taken together, the chapters provide use with a comprehensive model of the uniqueness and the differences of addressing COVID-19 across British and Polish schools. Specifically, it underscores the theoretical principles of the logic of schooling and the reasons of its permanence despite the survival alternative digital shift. Mikiewicz and Jurczak-Morris's book is a milestone, not only for specialists in the sociology of education, but also for teachers and researchers who are interested in the experience of distance teaching and learning during the pandemic including the pedagogical relationship, the new roles of teachers and students, curriculum design and coverage, assessment, and the functioning of schooling across societies in general.

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