# "Transforming" education in a pandemic: Global trends and spaces of resistance

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Education is, and has always been, a social struggle. The most visible aspect of this struggle often surrounds the content of education, or as Canadian Curriculum Scholar William Pinar (2015) frames it, "what knowledge is of most worth" (p. 32)? This is a question that is fundamentally about the aims of public education. The answer depends on a multitude of factors including how knowledge is conceptualized, what the role of the school is seen to be, and who decides these issues.

At the same time, what is taught is entwined with a second key question: how does teaching happen? Often, this question is posed instrumentally: how will knowledge be linearly transmitted from teacher to learner? This framing guides the logic of educational reforms that seek to make teaching more "effective" in order to achieve pre-determined educational outcomes. The struggle, however, comes to the fore when pedagogy is understood as an "event in time" (Ellsworth, 2015, p. 4) in which teachers and students engage in the often messy work of making sense of knowledge within a particular place and time.

Looking at these two questions (What is taught? How teaching happens?) provides a framework for exploring current dominant global discourses about the "transformation" of education, as well as identifying potential spaces of resistance to the neo-liberal rationalities guiding this transformation.

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## OECD and the transformation of public education

It is not "new" to argue that the OECD approach to education is driven by a neoliberal rationality. Broadly, this approach takes education primarily as an instrument for national economic prosperity, and thus an important arena of global competition. The OECD agenda is formed through the demands of global knowledge economies (e.g. productive workers) and is based on, and further normalizes, the assumption that the standardization of education and teachers' work is possible (and desirable) across cultures and languages (Kuehn, 1999, 2004). Perhaps the most visible example of this is the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA), a test that began in 2000 and is administered to 15-year-olds around the world every three years. According to the OECD, the test is "designed to gauge how well the students master key subjects in order to be prepared for real-life situations in the adult world[2]." The underlying aim is to define and shape educational policy across jurisdictions.

Looking at the expanding focus of PISA in recent years through the question "what is taught" provides an example of how neoliberalism as a political ideology extends a market rationale into "all aspects of thought and activity" (Brown, 2003, para. 19). While PISA originally focused on mathematics, reading and science, the test has expanded in recent years to measure "complex problem solving" (in 2012), "collaborative problem solving" (in 2015) and "global competence" (in 2018). In these shifts, the "what" of education has expanded from traditional "content domains" to "other factors that play a vital role in making the most of the opportunities that schools provide" (Bertling, Borgonovi, & Almonte, 2016). These factors are broadly called "psychosocial skills." While there is increasing recognition of the importance of social and emotional learning within educational research (Schonert-Reichl, 2017), the risk is that this learning is reduced to a transmittable set of skills to maintain the status quo, rather than skills that support students to critically engage with power and privilege. For instance, a recent analysis of "grit" as a universal "skill" argues that framing grit as an object to teach transforms students' "inner thoughts" into something to be managed according to an implicit "cultural thesis about the 'right' kind of child" (Kirchgasler, 2018, p. 710). This object is given the appearance of being "neutral" as it is transformed into a quantifiable global measure, such as those assessed by PISA.

Alongside shifts to PISA, the OECD has explicitly connected "what is taught" with "how teaching happens" through the Education 2030 Initiative. Indeed, Education 2030 seeks to answer two questions: "What

knowledge, skills, attitudes and values will today's students need to thrive and shape their world?" and "How can instructional systems develop these knowledge, skills, attitudes and values effectively" (OECD, 2018a, p. 2). In a phased approach, the project has first sought to answer these questions by developing a global "learning framework" based on "international curriculum analysis" (OECD, 2018b, p.1). The second phase of the project, which launched in 2019, focuses on building "common ground on the principles and instructional designs that can effectively implement intended curricula" and developing "the types of competencies and profiles of teachers who can support all students to achieve desired outcome for their future success" (p. 1). In other words, while it may have been implicit before, the OECD is now explicitly interested in how teaching happens, and pedagogy is reduced to a set of universal skills that make up a (so-called) effective teacher.

Taken together, PISA and Education 2030 operate as governance tools aimed at shaping educational policy and practice within a neoliberal, and neo-colonial, logic of education. These tools may be adapted to the "local context," or be made "culturally relevant," but the core of "what is taught" and "how teaching happens" is ultimately assumed to be universal and measurable. Part of the power of this framing is how it masks its own underlying cultural assumptions and expectations within a new "common-sense" for education, one in which knowledge is standardized and the teaching profession is de-professionalized.[3]

### The enabling conditions of the pandemic
AS the COVID-19 pandemic has disrupted schooling around the world, it has created conditions within which the OECD can further normalize and promote their agenda for education. A key response to the complex challenges of education during the pandemic has been an increasing reliance on digital technologies. In many places, teaching and learning has happened remotely using these technologies, or in hybrid situations in order to limit in-person interactions. While these responses are necessary in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, it is also critical to interrogate how this situation is being mobilized by the OECD to further extend their agenda into education.

Since schools first closed in many places around the world in March 2020, the OECD has been prolific in producing policy papers that seek to bring together "data, analysis and recommendations on a range of topics to address the emerging health, economic and societal crisis" (OECD, 2021). These papers, with titles such as "embracing digital learning and online collaboration," and "schooling disrupted, schooling rethought,"[4] are premised on the desirability of the standardization of both what is taught, as well as how teaching happens. Digital technologies, in turn, become the vehicle for these changes. For instance, one paper celebrates how "digital technology allows us to find entirely new answers to what people learn, how people learn, where people learn and when they learn" (OECD, 2020a, p. 1). What goes unstated is that these "answers" are premised on the possibility (and desirability) of autonomous independent learners (e.g. workers) guided by teachers who close the "productivity gap" by acting as "active agents for change" (OECD, 2020b, p. 8). While this may at first seem a laudable goal, the trope of teacher as facilitator, which also underpins the Education 2030 intiative, instrumentalises the work of teaching. Teaching is a script (that can be measured and evaluated) rather than a deeply relational practice that requires professional judgement.

Perhaps most insidious is how the framing of digital technologies as a neutral "solution" to the challenges facing education is in direct contradiction to how these
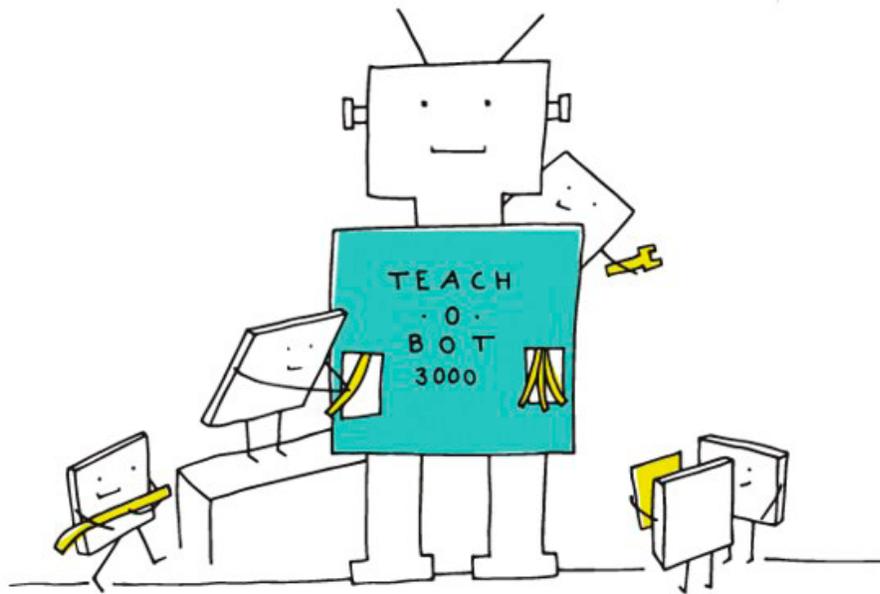
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3. In 2019, the BCTF held a forum focusing on how teacher experiences in BC disrupt the narrative guiding Education 2030. The report from that event is available here: https://bctf.ca/publications/ResearchReports.aspx?id=55269

4. As of February 2021, there were 16 papers specifically related to "school closures." See: https://www.oecd.org/coronavirus/en/policy-responses?keyword=school+closures

technologies are extending private interests into public education. Indeed, the OECD is explicit that educational transformation necessitates an infrastructure for online learning to meet the "needs of the 21st century" (OECD, 2020b, p. 9). Hindered by limited public funding and inadequate infrastructure, governments should create an "innovation-friendly climate" guided by an "entrepreneurial culture in education" (p. 8) to meet these needs. Within the educational sphere, digital "innovation" is led by major corporations, including Google, Microsoft, Apple, Amazon and Facebook, and this Ed Tech industry contributes to the ongoing privatisation of public education (Weiner, 2020). While educational products may be "free" to teachers and students, "private human experience" (our data) becomes the "free raw material" available to these private companies (Zuboff, 2019). This data is then used to market and sell products, shaping our future behaviour. In other words, "what is taught" becomes a market product, whereby quantified learning and teaching are captured and sold back to education systems as content. In turn, "how teaching happens" is driven by the very design of the technological platforms. Following Larry Kuehn (2019), this can be seen as a new form of colonization, whereby the "uncritical use of the [digital] platforms produce a form of privatization that is unexamined and that places pedagogy in the hands of those who design said platforms." (p. 8).

As an extension of the OECD policy agenda in education, the "tool" of technology is being mobilized as a mechanism to drive forward neoliberal rationalities for "what is taught" and "how teaching happens" in schools around the world. This is not a break from previous work, such as PISA and Education 2030, but rather an instrumentalization of their aims, a way to neatly package them for educational consumption and deployment through digital channels around the world.

## Transformation for public education

While the common sense of "transformation" during a global public health crisis may seem inevitable, it is precisely the experience of education during the pandemic that has the potential to disrupt a neoliberal rationality.

One key effect of the pandemic has been to reaffirm the vital role that a strong public sector plays in society. COVID-19 has starkly illustrated the fragility of neoliberalism and the inability of our current economic system to meet the needs of all. While it may be overly optimistic to herald the end of neoliberalism, the faltering of its logic is an opportunity to think differently about what is needed for society to flourish and thrive. Instead of focusing on developing certain kinds of global citizens (i.e. entrepreneurial teachers and students) what happens when true value is given to teaching and learning that is rooted in local communities? What happens when "skills" are un-tethered from the status

quo and used to critically engage with and challenge structures of power and privilege? What happens when meaningful relationships are centered in education, rather than business interests?

Teachers and their students are already grappling with these questions and issues everyday. Around the world, teachers have used their professional judgement to meet not only the academic needs of their students, but also unprecedented social and emotional needs. Untethered from physical school buildings, teachers and students have navigated new spaces of teaching and learning. Our school communities have had to work together to build connections and reliance in the face of unprecedented challenges. None of these experiences can be neatly packaged into a global toolkit, no matter how culturally relevant it claims to be.

The impossibility of the universal necessitates alternative visions for public education. Rather than answer the questions of what is taught and how teaching happens, how might these questions become fruitful spaces for engaging with the complexity of teaching and learning? How can we work together to mobilize and support local knowledges and places of learning? It is here where the global become a tool of resistance: building solidarity to challenge new spaces of global governance and promote transformation for more equitable and just societies.

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