The Inequity of Educational Opportunity During a Pandemic

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Abstract: Educational opportunity has rarely been truly equal in any society, although modern societies have made enormous efforts to assure greater equality. Inequality in education is most often a consequence of existing social differences which structure opportunity. Those individuals with greater financial resources tend to have a wider range of educational choices and access to a higher standard of educational opportunities than those people with lesser financial means. This situation has become increasingly apparent in the course of the COVID-19 pandemic. This paper discusses those inevitable differences which have exacerbated educational inequality during this pandemic. Such inequities are examined internationally.

Keywords: *education; educational opportunity; educational inequity; social differences; COVID-19.*

1. Education On-line for Social Equity

The current pandemic has necessitated major changes in societies around the globe in an effort to control the spread of the disease. Whether such measures have, or will contain the disease is yet to be determined and only in retrospect will nations be able to evaluate the success of each individual strategy employed. In nations' efforts to control COVID-19 there have been a number of strategic actions which will have enduring impact on society. Because of the need to contain the spread of the disease, one measure many nations decided to use was closure of educational institutions, for a limited time. In response to these closures, governments and educational institutions turned to the use of electronic media and communication sites to continue providing instruction. At first glance this approach appears to be an excellent solution, however it is fraught with problems of inequity.

On-line education is theoretically an excellent means to provide educational materials and instruction to students through virtual classrooms. Since the early 1990's a revolution in communications has been reshaping education (Tait, 2018) and there has been a concerted effort to provide for Open Educational Resources (OER) and Open Educational Practices (OEP), as defined by UNESCO, in an attempt towards reducing educational and social inequalities by providing for distance education and greater access to disadvantaged people, whether disadvantaged by geographic location (Downes, 2011), physical disability, social status or financial means (Lambert, 2020). The greater purpose of the efforts has been to provide for distributive justice in which resources generally available only to wealthier nations and individuals of at least some moderate financial means might be equally accessible to all people (Lambert, 2018). Free on-line educational resources, textbooks and courses are available to students who by circumstances of socio-cultural/financial position cannot otherwise acquire them. Nancy Fraser's model of schooling for social justice points out that economic, cultural and political justice concerns impact educational equity for societal groups of subordinate status (Keddie, 2012). Group identity politics, economics and minority cultural differences result in intentional and sub-intentional educational disparity.

Although UNESCO's statement of purpose for OER and OEP was to provide universal primary education by 2015 (Laurillard, 2014), a large segment of available resources and efforts have been focused on post-secondary/higher education (university level). Nations, corporations and

universities have committed significant financial and human assets to the provision of supportive materials and courses for university level instruction. Thus, the initial UNESCO goal failed to be realized as "on-line education did not work" (Laurillard, 2014, 223) in part due to misplaced emphasis. Lambert found "efforts towards reducing educational and social inequalities are dispersed, inefficient and ineffective" (Lambert, 2018, 226). A lack of coordination and a failure to recognize inherent problems with the provision of on-line education has meant that OER and OEP "have yet to play a significant role in promoting social inclusion" (Bossu, et al., 2012, 151).

The focus on provision of higher educational opportunities in the past has not produced the anticipated outcomes. It has been assumed that offering university level course work on-line would reduce student costs and hence attract socio-economically disadvantaged segments of the population. The reality has been quite different. Studies reveal that those individuals most likely to utilize on-line education are those who are already highly educated, qualified professionals or have substantial financial means, and not, as originally envisaged, the global community of disadvantaged learners lacking access to a good higher education (Warschauer, 2003; Laurillard, 2016; Rohs & Ganz, 2015; Laurillard & Kennedy, 2017 Lambert, 2020).

When efforts were directed towards primary and secondary education similar results were observed as those witnessed in the realm of higher education (Page, 2002; Norris, et al., 2003; Engstrom & Tinto, 2008; Knox, 2013; Lambert, 2020). Students from more affluent school districts and families tended to have greater access to on-line educational resources than those districts and individuals possessing fewer resources. On-line education and digitally enhanced learning opportunities are often conflated with availability of educational materials. The availability of OER does not equate to the accessibility of those resources. Access to resources is a significant issue. Therein lies a major problem. For a substantial portion of students, at all educational levels, access is simply not possible due to multiple barriers. As early as 2003, Norris and her colleagues pointed out that the lack of access meant there was no use and therefore no impact upon student education (Norris et al., 2003). Although this study examined classroom access, the same issues confront distance learning.

2. Assumption of Accessibility

There appears to be an assumption among the educationally and financially advantaged that there is universal access to the technologies needed to partake in on-line learning. This is not borne out in much of the

world, even in developed countries with significant national resources. When universities in urban areas of the United States were closed in response to the need for a general quarantine many students were left with no access to university libraries, course assignments and faculty members (Iida, 2020). Although few students do not have a mobile phone, laptop computer or tablet from which they could access assignments and course related activities, many rely on free WIFI offered in university residence halls and libraries. They also depend heavily on commercial establishments that attract students seeking internet connectivity. During the quarantine such places as coffee and pastry shops, public libraries, etc. were closed. Even when connectivity was possible time limits were often imposed due to the excessive broadband use. Only 72% of students in one developmental English writing, university program, were able to access the internet daily after the university closure (Iida, 2020). The poorest of students who depended on the use of the university's computers were even more disadvantaged. Similarly, in a class of 18 special needs children in one Paris school district only two (2) had any means of internet access (Bonfillon, 2020).

A study of Romanian school children reported on 8 May 2020 (IRES) that 32% of children enrolled in the 2019-2020 school year had no functioning device to access on-line education and that 50% did not take part in on-line classes. Thirty-seven percent of children in the lowest grade levels did not have exclusive use of electronic equipment necessary to access on-line education. Children in rural areas had the lowest access rate at 62% while urban rates ran to 76% nation-wide. IRES estimated that 903,870 school children did not have internet access. For those who had access between 29% and 34% did not have microphone capability and more than 25% did not have video cameras on their electronic device. Additionally, 36% of families with children in school had two or more children sharing internet access. Conflicts arose in these cases because two or more children needed to be on-line at the same time. The study also stated that between 19% and 21% of Romania did not have a sufficiently strong enough internet signal to maintain simultaneous school utilization and 12% were outside of internet networks. It was estimated that 52,000 households had no electricity, most of these were in Roma communities.

When access to the internet was available, access to printers often was not, further limiting the ability to complete course requirements. Students and parents have spent many hours copying homework assignments from the internet or phone message into the workbooks prior to even completing the assignment.

Another access problem entails those parents who must work from home using the internet and need to share their equipment with their child during work hours. Many parents may have been forced to purchase new electronic equipment in order to have their child(ren) attend school on-line while at the same time they themselves conduct business from home.

Issues of access were further complicated by a lack of coordination in the selection of internet platforms. SKYPE, What's ap, Google Classroom, Zoom and MIT along with e-mail and phone contacts have all been used variously by teachers in the same school. The use of multiple platforms has forced parents and students to download new programs and applications. Those individuals less familiar with the technologies involved or who do not have the means to add new applications suffer new disadvantages. The schools' failure to coordinate on-line education delivery systems has caused confusion, multiple switches from one platform to another, and involved inordinate expenditures of parental time struggling to help their child(ren) navigate the educational process.

3. Support for education on-line

In addition to the assumption that there is easy access for most students to high-speed internet, there is the presumption that children receive adequate support at home to complete their studies. Openness of opportunity is "often framed simply as 'getting access' to a high-speed internet connection" (Knox, 2013, 22). This however, ignores the problems of adequate support from teachers, parents and classmates. Engstrom and Tinto (2008) rightly point out access without support is not opportunity. Parents and teachers need to be knowledgeable in the use of the technologies employed for learning. Parents also need to assist the child(ren) with assignments and frequently take on the mantle of teacher in the physical absence of the professional. Most parents are not prepared for this role and some may not have the educational background to fulfill the role. The preponderance of educators lack training in virtual teaching and though giving their best effort find themselves inadequate while providing instruction as if they were still in the physical classroom.

The IRES study (2020) completed in Romania revealed that nearly two-thirds of students had daily school lessons while 22% had contact twice a week. Moreover, the report said the quantity of homework and time spent doing it increased significantly with 25% of students taking four or more hours daily to complete homework in addition to time spent on-line. Another 26% of children spent three hours and 31% spent two hours more

than the time they were on-line for instruction. IRES concluded that most parents (up to 70%) were engaged with their child(ren)'s lessons daily. Forty percent of those parents spent four or more hours helping with homework. While parental involvement in the educational process increased, only a mere 38% of children in the fifth grade and higher had contact with their professors.

4. Conclusion and Discussion

It must be clearly stated that making educational resources available to the general world population or to a specific subsection of a population is incomplete if those resources are not universally and easily accessible. Much has been accomplished in the creation and accumulation of educational materials but the goal of universal accessibility remains illusory. Disadvantages which currently exist in the school systems across multiple nations are magnified in a time of crisis when on-line schooling becomes the principle means of education. Those with limited financial means in normal times find it difficult to provide for their child(ren)'s basic needs when they become unemployed due to consequences of natural disaster or pandemic. Such conditions exacerbate existing negative circumstances associated with poverty, disability, gender and racial prejudices.

Norris and associates (2003) found nearly two decades ago that American K-12 classrooms had inadequate digital and electronic resources to provide for modern technological education and no provision for on-line learning at home. This condition has not improved in nearly two decades. Yet Page (2002) reported that when tech-enhanced classrooms did exist, disadvantaged students performed statistically significantly better in measures of mathematics and self-esteem than members of a control group without the enhancements. This study demonstrated that digital learning, when aided by properly trained teachers was effective. When issues of access to digital learning are solved it has been found that "children who benefitted the most from attendance in these programs were children from backgrounds of greater social disadvantage" (Krieg, et al. 2015, 120) and students with physical and emotional disabilities also benefitted from on-line lessons (Brunvard & Adadeh, 2010). Regrettably, the privileged class has the greatest rate of use of electronic connectivity and hence the "digital divide" between the advantaged and disadvantaged has increased (DiMaggio & Hargattai, 2001; Becker, 2010).

Knox (2013) remarked a decade after Page (2002) that movement towards open access resources, necessary as it is, was insufficient to achieve

equitable outcomes because delivery systems and educators trained in the use of technologies were scarce. Teachers need to be trained in how to use the available technologies servicing on-line education. And delivery systems need to be created and coordinated both within schools and between schools in order to avoid the confusion and conflicts described previously. The present educational crisis illustrates Lambert's (2018) concern that on-line education has been inefficient and ineffective as nations have failed to plan for crisis. Plans need to be drafted before the next crisis strikes. Teachers need to be technological savvy and well versed in the crisis delivery plan. Parents also need to be aware of how at home and on-line education will be delivered in a future crisis.

When the next crisis will occur cannot be predicted, but it is certain another crisis that interrupts the existing education structure will happen. In the past when institutional provision of education was disrupted by a crisis such as a flood, a weather event, an earthquake or a similar cause there was been scant attention given to the loss of educational opportunity. This has been due to the relatively limited geographic impact of such events. However, the current COVID-19 pandemic poses the same lost educational opportunity but on a massive, world-wide scale. The lessons learned in this crisis may serve us well in how to respond in the future to less wide-spread educational disruption. It behooves societies to re-think digital, on-line education and seek effective solutions.

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