## Reflections on the Impact of Covid-19
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Not long after the Lockdown began in March 2020, many educationalists started to say that this was going to be *the* opportunity for education to change. The great paradigm shift in teaching and learning that had been much talked about but little delivered was finally here.

Covid-19 has, indeed, changed schools. It has changed education. It has changed teachers. It has even changed parental perceptions of school. There is debate about whether schools are the 'safe spaces' they once were. There is now an intensified debate about process and procedure.

Back in 2012, Will Richardson wrote a short TED book called, *Why School?*, which helped to challenge some of the ideas about what school is all about in a way that looks *sort of* prophetic in relation to what we are going through right now.

There, Richardson writes,

> The world has changed – and continues changing – rapidly and radically when it comes to the ways in which we can learn, and what knowledge, skills, dispositions, and forms of literacy our children will need to flourish in their future. Plain and simple, the web and technologies we use to access it drive those changes. And those changes are, in a word, profound. Sooner or later, that upheaval will force us to tackle the 'why school?' question head-on.

He quotes Canadian education researcher Stephen Downes who notes that *"we have to stop thinking of an education as something that is delivered to us and instead see it as something we create for ourselves."*

**Education should be something that we create for ourselves.**

Now – that is something worth thinking about. If our pupils in school were allowed to design their own learning programmes, how different would they be from what we 'learned' educators might put together for them? How different would it be from the traditional school education that we currently have in place? (And yet, in how many homes across the country were parents feeling less than adequate because they felt that the learning programme, they had put together over the lockdown just was not good enough.)

Richardson then starts to lay his cards well and truly on the table when he writes,

> What doesn't work any longer is our education system's stubborn focus on delivering a curriculum [specification] that's growing increasingly irrelevant to today's kids, the outmoded standardised assessments we use in an attempt to measure our success, and the command-and-control thinking that is wielded over the entire process.  All of that must be rethought.

The point that Richardson is making is that learning should be a voyage of discovery rather than one of delivery.  Does "Lockdown School" make learners better or worse?  What exactly do school leaders need to learn about how we can continue to reshape education post-COVID?   He asks a key question:

> [Will we be able to] shift from content mastery to learning mastery?  That means students [would] have more ownership over their own learning, using their access to knowledge and teachers to create their own unique paths to the outcomes we, and they, deem important.

And what about the whopping great elephant in the room – the inequality in the education system?  Some kids don't have access to a laptop, iPad or phone that allows them to learn in the same ways as other kids.   But, guess what?   This is the same on a normal day in school.   There is inequality in society.  There is inequality in school.  There is inequality at home.   And yes, we need to do something about this . . . and learning is often that golden ticket to a better life.

## What Should Be Left in the Past?

Northern Ireland has quickly adapted to the present situation, suggesting that we are capable of more when it comes to re-organising learning for our children.   We have been pushed out of the classroom and made to engage with technologies in new exciting ways.  We've been forced to scaffold learning differently.   We've had to push ourselves to meet our students where they currently are -- engaging with them/ following up/ encouraging/ supporting in different ways.   We have learnt more about remote and blended learning and we need to keep running with this.

I love Google Classroom, for example, and have been using it for a long time before 2020 – but perhaps we have been too quick to regard it as the default tool?   We need to get better at blending our learning and using different tools and approaches to support our students.

We need to leave our staid, 'traditional' teaching methods behind us and take advantage of technology's ability to push us beyond simply teaching to the test.   It doesn't make sense only to prepare children for merely what will be examined.  We should be preparing them for life.

Such a goal would require us to revisit the very purpose of school and a new definition of why young people should attend.

**What Should Be Embraced for the Future?**

Northern Ireland schools need to do more to level the educational playing field.  We need to work harder to solve the social disadvantages that still impact some of our students, by, for example, tackling underachievement and the digital divide. We need to find new ways to challenge the apathy that some students (and parents) have towards the value of education. We need to make sure that we can help to continue to develop emotionally-rounded, resilient young people who have a passion for learning.

Covid-19 has made teaching and learning more difficult.  It is hard to look over the shoulder to see how our pupils are doing.  It is hard to get amongst the pupils to help, challenge and support.   This has highlighted the need to rethink our methods of formative assessment to discover how our pupils are doing.

Our schools are now full of new procedures for cleaning, sanitising, getting masks on, following one way directions  . . . so that we certainly have less time to focus on the learning. But, we need to take advantage of the disruption to find new ways to motivate, inspire and connect with our classes.

Mick Waters in the *Guardian* reminds us that

> The principles of teaching include the transmission of 'big ideas', immersion in the discipline of knowledge domains, the detailed instruction of processes and skills and, crucially, the building of enthusiasm, motivation, and capability in the learner.

Furthermore, we need to make sure that our teachers are the best trained and best supported professionals they can be.   Teacher Professional Learning needs to be cutting-edge, expansive, research-driven and needs to be led by experienced practitioners who can engage and enthuse teachers.  Daniel Willingham says that "teaching, like any complex cognitive skill, must be practised to be improved." This applies to our subject knowledge and our pastoral and leadership skills.

Teachers need better support and I have done my bit by being involved in #teachmeets and organising teacher development opportunities such as #niedcamp and #edufestni.  Teachers are lacking the support they need to develop their practice despite the genuinely productive efforts of #teachmeets, #niedcamp and #edufestni.  We have lost many other opportunities for collaboration and we need more.

Here are some suggestions about how teachers might be able to further develop their practice:

1. Teachers should take control of their professional practice with a compulsory learning log.   Teachers should be given 5 days through the school year where they have to take part in centrally organised training.  They should have to get 5 certificates of completion which forms part of their PRSD programme.   Other jobs (such as nursing) have really good programmes to support professional learning and development.  The EA should help organise a host of events across NI to support both academic and pastoral staff and allow them to earn Professional Development credits.

2. Teachers should compete for fully funded Masters and PhD programmes. There should be a number of funded opportunities for teachers to get their full fees paid for university postgraduate programmes. In each case part of the stipulation should be that the teachers involved must spend 10 days each year sharing what they have learned with other teachers, therefore creating a broad community of practice. (Maybe this would be something the GTCNI could support?)
3. Teachers should be offered a short, paid sabbatical every 10 years. Sabbatical one (after 10 years) would allow teachers to return to university for 'Top-up' training for 2 weeks. Sabbatical two (after 20 years) would allow teachers a month to research good practice ideas in their subject areas. Sabbatical three (after 30 years) would allow teachers one term to teach at a local university to help teach the new teachers of the future and develop their skills. This would also enable us to share the institutional knowledge of teaching and learning best practice in NI.
4. Teachers need more 'subject' days and more days where external agents come in to train teachers in what are the new developments in education. Many teachers stay in one school their whole career and are rarely subjected to new thinking and new ideas. Maybe teachers can organise themselves into cluster groups and be given time to collaborate.

The Story of how Covid-19 changed education in Northern Ireland is still to be written. My hope is that it is the teachers – the practitioners in the classrooms – will be the ones to lead the revolution and make the changes that help us develop a robust, modern, inclusive and forward-thinking educational context.

Richardson, W (2012) *Why School?* TED Conferences. (Available on Kindle)

Willingham, D (2009) *Why don't students like school?: A Cognitive Scientist Answers Questions About How the Mind Works and What It Means for the Classroom.* Hoboken, New Jersey:  Jossey-Bass Publishers.

Waters, M.  https://www.theguardian.com/teacher-network/teacher-blog/2013/apr/22/future-of-schooling-education-spring-manifesto

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