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Education after COVID

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On many evenings in January, I hustled my two children to bed, cooing, “You need a good night’s sleep: you’re going back to school tomorrow!” only to eat my words the next morning. First, schools were supposed to open on schedule after the winter break, on January 3. Then, with Omicron surging, the date was pushed back by two days, until January 5. Then, after a flood of health concerns were raised, the reopening was postponed to January 17. On January 17, there was a massive snowstorm, and they claimed that COVID precautions would be too hard to observe. And again on January 18. They had given up on remote schooling by that point. The kids were feral.

Ontario, where I live, has closed schools for longer than almost anywhere in North America or Europe during COVID (Ontario, 2022). The Ontario Science Table, which nominally advises the provincial government on COVID-related policy, has opposed further closures, noting: “Ontario evidence shows that school closures are associated with substantial mental health and educational attainment harms” (ibid.). For a worn-out working parent like me, they are also associated with a very low irritability threshold and a growing backlog of unanswered emails.

The publication of this issue coincides neatly with the two-year anniversary of that week in March when COVID-19 first shut down my part of the Western world. It is difficult to appreciate the scale of chaos and the amount of heartbreak that was endured by so many while others, myself included, sat in comfortable homes, day after day, living through Wi-Fi connections. But one thing that hit home, quite acutely, for just about every parent in the world was the educational crisis precipitated by the pandemic.

A global reckoning of the educational damage done by COVID-19 is already underway. The data are dismal, if unsurprising. A report released by the World Bank, UNESCO, and UNICEF in December 2021 predicted a loss in lifetime earnings of \$17 trillion for the COVID generation (UNESCO, 2021). Whatever we may think about this narrowly economic interpretation of educational outcomes, it captures concerns that most of us who work in education are likely to prioritize: the report documents how the pandemic amplified inequality within and across nations. COVID hit our systems where they were weakest, burdening the least well off in a tragic upending of Rawls’ maximin principle. If there is a silver lining, it is that no one can now deny that a functioning education system is central to the functioning of the rest of society. As the international ethics consortium Globethics has highlighted, the reinvigoration of education worldwide should be regarded as a pressing ethical priority in all our post-pandemic thinking: “as the world reacts to the heavy loss, of life, of livelihoods, of health, of industry, of education and starts to emerge from one of the most disruptive periods in modern times, asserting values-driven and values-oriented education is critical for a sustainable future” (Globethics, 2022).

Policy makers and practitioners seem open to philosophical guidance as they start to reconstruct education in a post-pandemic world. The editors of *PIE* felt that this moment was ripe for reflection using the problems, tools, and wisdom of our field as an entry point. How can philosophy of education help us understand the impact of COVID? And how has COVID impacted longstanding questions in philosophy of education? To approach these questions, I invited leading philosophers of education, mostly North American, to write brief, free-form essays on their thinking about their areas of expertise in light of the pandemic. The concept was inspired by a special supplement in *Harper’s* magazine called “Life After Trump” (*Harper’s*, 2021). The end of Trump’s presidency was a pivotal moment that to many felt like a gasp of air after four years of suffocation. The magazine took the opportunity to reflect on the detritus left in Trump’s wake, with pointed essays on specific topics. Some of them were unexpectedly playful, like reality after Trump, golf after Trump, and punctuation after Trump. It was a departure from

the periodical's signature long-form journalism, but I found it soothing: We need something fresh and digestible when we are staggering out of trauma.

In this spirit, I am delighted to present a somewhat unconventional special issue of *PIE* that tackles "Education After COVID" with an arsenal of philosophical tools. The authors in this issue are all recognized for their work in the area of philosophy of education that they discuss – from homeschooling and hope to teacher morale and virtue education. Many of them wrote books on these topics before or during the pandemic. Some have partnered with co-authors in complementary areas – with students (Knight-Abowitz & Bennett-Kinne; Curren et al.), with academic colleagues in another field (Curren et al.), with an educational administrator (Martin & Pulvermacher), with a teacher (Santoro & Hazel), and with a poet (Ruitenberg & Rathje). They write from their expertise and often from their heart, weaving new and old scholarship with reflection and dialogue.

Some of these essays describe how COVID-19 compounded the educational catastrophes we were already dealing with before the beginning of the pandemic. Nick Burbules writes that the epistemic and political deterioration of the Trump era was extended by the crisis of a new global infection, making the project of teaching critical thinking both more urgent and more elusive. The pandemic has fuelled conspiracy thinking and, in parts of the United States, hijacked schools as a source of disinformation and a vehicle for further polarization. "Under the conditions of COVID," Burbules argues, "schools have been in an especially challenging dilemma: we expect them to be sites that promote critical thinking, but instead they have become ground zero for the militant refusal to have children vaccinated or wear masks."

In the United States and elsewhere, COVID has also exacerbated the educational travesties of racism and structural oppression. Scholars, educators, and activists who have been sounding the alarm for decades may feel a mix of relief and indignation at others finally waking up to the existence or severity of injustices that COVID has made plainer to see. Kal Alston writes how school closures and slapdash solutions perpetuated systemic racism, while the momentum of Black Lives Matter activism in the summer of 2020 faded into "performative allyship" and neoliberal PR as concern about the pandemic once again took centre stage. Arguing that such injustice was in fact "normal" all along, Alston claims, "COVID was less a creator of race-based and class-based inequality than its megaphone."

Similarly, Doris Santoro, author of *Demoralized* (Harvard Education Press, 2018), reflects with teacher Julia Hazel that "the pandemic has uniquely revealed the interplay between demoralization and institutional racism." The unequal impacts of the pandemic compounded the strain on teachers and students from marginalized populations, while the challenge of pivoting to entirely new forms of teaching hastened the demoralization of already under-supported and de-professionalized teachers across the board. Using Hazel's own experience of teaching during COVID as a case study, they discuss how, with the right support, teachers can "remoralize" themselves during times of adversity.

With its inordinately gendered impacts, the pandemic has also underscored the unfinished work of dismantling sexism in both schools and public life. Kathleen Knight-Abowitz and Andrea Bennett-Kinne, reflecting on decades of stalled progress in the realm of citizenship education, lament that "COVID-19 and its ongoing variants provide painful reminders of gender's persistence as a global category organizing dominance and oppression, one which significantly structures participation in public and civic life." They explore ongoing tensions within feminist approaches and between "boom" and "bust" postfeminism, arguing that citizenship education requires continued recognition of girls and women as a gendered category and of the nation-state as a regulatory boundary.

Some of the essays in this collection discuss how COVID has reframed familiar aspects of education, calling for new careful attention. They use philosophical resources to rethink default attitudes and institutional arrangements that had been mostly taken for granted.

Chris Martin, author of the new book *The Right to Higher Education: A Political Theory* (Oxford University Press, 2022) and Andrew Pulvermacher, Associate Dean at Okanagan College, explain how the pandemic decisively severed higher education from its bricks-and-mortar context. The abrupt shutdown of campus life and most public functions of the university calls for a careful re-analysis of "the basic aims and values of higher education." This philosophical task, they argue, must be approached in

the context of “epistemic uncertainty about the traditional (i.e., late-twentieth-century) institutional context and what makes that context educationally worthwhile.”

School closures meant that education was also separated from its institutional context for K–12 students and their families, launching a worldwide unintended experiment in homeschooling. James Dwyer (who co-authored, with Shawn Peters, *Homeschooling: The History and Philosophy of a Controversial Practice*, University of Chicago Press, 2019) discusses how efforts to improve the regulation of homeschooling in the United States were upended by the pandemic, prompting new assessments of the politics, purpose, and limits of the practice. After two years of sporadic involuntary schooling at home, “We have no clear conception of homeschooling as a distinct phenomenon,” but we have a significant opportunity to rethink what we take “school” to mean.

When schools closed and learning migrated to virtual platforms, knowledge of educational technology and distance education that had previously been the purview of select scholars and educators suddenly became relevant to all teachers and parents. Norm Friesen argues that the rash adoption of school-by-video-conference missed the “text-based, interactive, personalized, and immersive learning technologies” that experts had been developing for years, reimagining the time and space of the classroom. He uses Hegel’s previously untranslated remarks from an 1811 graduation address to theorize this distinction between the scholastic and the domestic, which explains some of the failures of schooling during COVID, and gestures at how to think about remote learning in its aftermath.

Sarah Stitzlein, author of *Learning How to Hope: Reviving Democracy through Our Schools and Civil Society* (Oxford University Press, 2020), explains how the pandemic has attenuated her views on hope as a critical element of democracy and education. Elaborating on her Deweyan conception of hope as “not something that we find, hold, or contain” but something that “entails action, agency, and taking responsibility,” Stitzlein reflects on how the pandemic has proliferated despair. She stresses that our personal feelings of hopelessness are inseparable from “social, political, and economic conditions” and emphasizes the need for teachers, students, and scholars to “build hope together.”

In addition to shining a spotlight on known problems and reframing some of our longest standing beliefs about education, the pandemic has provided a wake-up call and a window of opportunity that may set us on a better course. Several authors in this issue urge us to seize this transitional moment to enact paradigm shifts that may have been unthinkable a few years ago.

Francis Schrag takes a lesson from the pandemic that could help us radically rethink educational assessment and measurement. The global health crisis has brought home the fact that “a single cause, like a highly contagious virus, can and does produce myriad effects, all of which we need to take account of.” Trying to attribute outcomes to variables that are profoundly intermingled will produce inaccurate data. Yet educational assessment tends to ignore the influence of both collateral learning and the background conditions that inhibit learning. Both were on full display during the pandemic. Schrag argues for assessment that tracks side effects and focuses on students’ continued motivation to learn, rather than on artificially isolated educational outcomes.

Randall Curren, author of *Why Character Education?* (PESGB Impact, 2017), also sees the pandemic as a chance to capitalize on educational ideas whose time has come. In a conversation piece written with Richard Ryan and Zach Barber, he explores the interpersonal and personal equipment we need to overcome adversity and develop moral character. Ryan uses self-determination theory (SDT) to draw attention to the importance of “need-supportive human relationships – connections that support students’ needs for competence, autonomy, and positive relatedness as they engage in relevant activities of learning,” many of which were disastrously lacking during the pandemic. Barber explains that mindfulness meditation trains us in the skill of self-regulation and could have helped us cope with the stress of the pandemic. For these authors, promoting “ecosystems of need support” and teaching mindfulness will not only help students prepare for the next stressful disruption, it will also enhance character and moral education overall.

In her previous work, Anca Gheaus (co-editor of the *Routledge Handbook of the Philosophy of Childhood and Children*, Routledge, 2018) has argued against the default parental monopoly on childcare, emphasizing the moral obligations that arise from “the special goods of childhood,” such as unstructured discovery and creativity. Children are not best served by learning in rigid settings and spending most of

their time with the same few adults. While this perspective reveals that the pandemic has had additional costs for children beyond the documented academic setbacks, Gheaus sees the pandemic recovery as a moment of possibility for designing better schools, communities, and cities, in which children can play freely and safely under shared child-rearing arrangements.

Finally, in a lyrical and hopeful piece, philosopher of education Claudia Ruitenberg and writer/filmmaker Elisa Rathje reflect on the pandemic as proof of the possibility of “changed desires and a re-evaluation of individual and collective values and goals,” which can be applied to education and the public response to the climate crisis. They share stories of people making changes as a result of pandemic constraints alongside those learning to live “within the limits of the planet.” Such uncoerced rearrangements of desires can be a source of fulfilment and pleasure, as well as a step toward justice and sustainability.

This special issue was supported by a grant from the Canadian Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council (SSHRC). While *PIE* had intended to put this money toward in-person events, such as themed workshops, COVID has, alas, disrupted these endeavours as well. Among the educational casualties of the pandemic are the unique opportunities afforded by milling around conference lobbies, walking down the hall to talk to a colleague, and presenting work in progress to scholars at other institutions. In addition, because of increased care responsibilities and personal burdens, many scholars’ research agendas have been stalled, and journal submissions are down. While we remain physically distanced, juggling the relentless demands of the mundane alongside the thrum of the existential, we hope that this issue sparks renewed engagement with the purpose and direction of philosophy of education in a post-COVID world.

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About the Author

Lauren Bialystok is Associate Professor in the Department of Social Justice Education at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education at the University of Toronto, and a co-editor of *Philosophical Inquiry in Education*. Her research interests include identity, educational ethics, political philosophy, and gender. She is co-author (with Lisa Andersen) of *Touchy Subject: The History and Philosophy of Sex Education* (University of Chicago Press, 2022).