Parenting and learning in a time of global pandemic: what policy makers and school leaders should do for children's education right now and consider the future
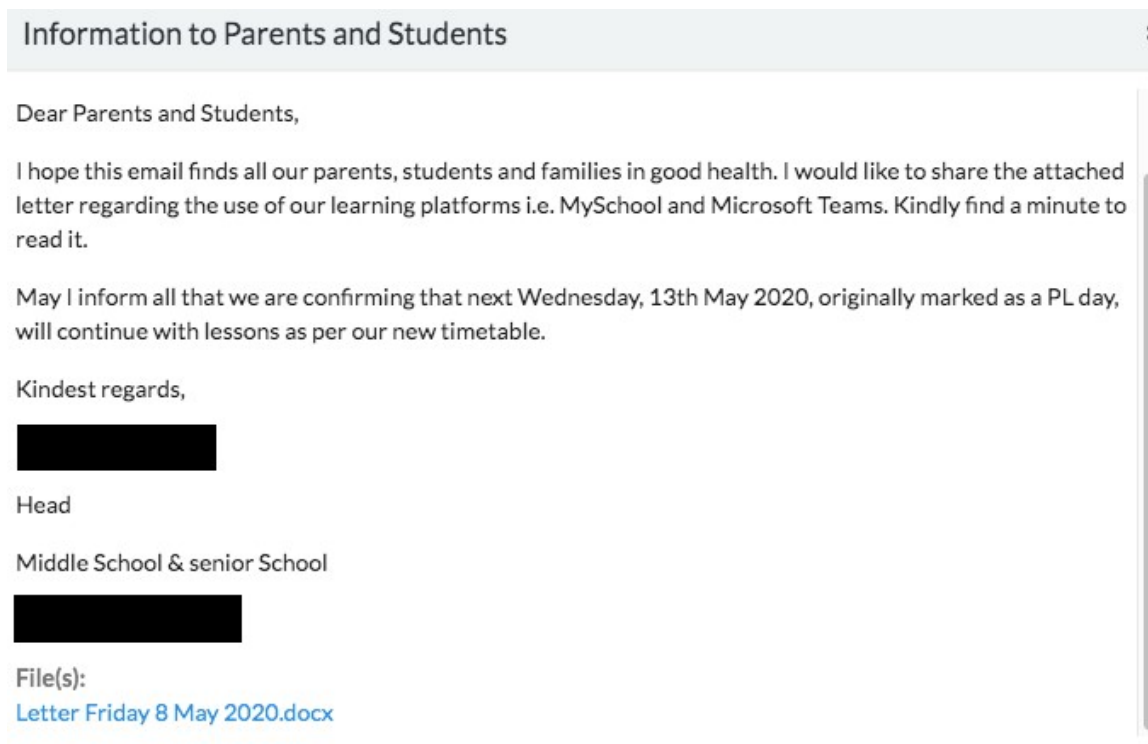
Roughly 1.5 billion children globally are out of school due to the pandemic. As many schools turned to online learning, preliminary research already questions whether the current arrangements might result in poorer educational outcomes. Velislava Hillman examines the direction of education policy globally and what kind of learning can be enabled in a time when back-to-school is still far ahead.

Whether in-school time leads to better outcomes compared to online learning has remained unclear. Along with imposed social distancing and lockdown, however, the quality of education children and youth attain now has been challenged like never before. Research shows that factors such as welfare provision, job security and family dynamics impact on a child's wellbeing, leading me to question the kind of education that goes on now when parents feel ever more stressed in trying to sustain their jobs and children are homebound missing friends.

Grappling with homeschooling and work myself, I put a halt to this sudden rollercoaster to re-visit the theories of learning and ask: what is school supposed to be all about? Is it not meant to provide a secure environment for discovery, socialisation, and a guarantee that children will find their pathway and enjoy a field of self-fulfilment as they head towards adulthood? Isn't it supposed to be what *skolē* meant to the Greeks – that in which leisure is employed? Having revisited Montessori's student-led approach and Piaget's constructivist experiential learning by making, and recognising the importance of the sociality and context, I invite education policy makers and school leaders to re-think the educational strategies for both short- and long-term.

It is time to consider the kind of skills we want to equip children with, regardless of the limitations this pandemic puts on us. It is also important to identify how children experience these new conditions of living and learning. Ultimately, we must re-position the role of school as a place that not only makes but also *lets* learning happen. We need to re-think children's learning goals and expectations. We need to reimagine the kind of curriculum that they need, to not only the current circumstances but also unimagined futures shaped by new norms of socializing, working and learning that we have yet to design and get used to.

My eleven-year-old's mainstream school covers roughly 20 subjects. Since the lockdown, he has been receiving emails with lengthy instructions for all. While he has been navigating through most of this alone, he also needs help with mathematics, with catching on new school-related mail. Children younger than him certainly need even more support in navigating through disparate student information systems, instructional applications, and 'live' lessons where these are available. Importantly, my son also misses his friends.

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Information to Parents and Students ✖

Dear Parents and Students,

I hope this email finds all our parents, students and families in good health. I would like to share the attached letter regarding the use of our learning platforms i.e. MySchool and Microsoft Teams. Kindly find a minute to read it.

May I inform all that we are confirming that next Wednesday, 13th May 2020, originally marked as a PL day, will continue with lessons as per our new timetable.

Kindest regards,

████████████

Head

Middle School & senior School

████████████

File(s):
Letter Friday 8 May 2020.docx

Images: screen grabs from teacher emails sent to students aged 10 and 11 instructing them how to navigate through systems, where to find instruction material, how to upload homework, and deadlines. Subjects cover Arts, Drama, Geography, English, French.

Then, what about children with disabilities? Children with one parent who is the single breadwinner and cannot afford to homeschool? Children with limited or no access to technologies? We have already seen that many students remain logged out of online schooling. As schools are likely to be stuck with virtual learning for a bit longer, more needs to change with the help of teachers and policy beyond the patchwork fix of copy-paste lessons meant for the physical classroom. For one, policy and educators have to prioritize from the typical lessons, based on what is manageable (whether for the children or whoever is supporting them) and what will aid the transition to a long-term strategy. What kind of learning can we redesign? Can decision-makers take advice from implemented policies that encourage problem-based, collaborative and self-paced learning?

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Assignment submission

Due date	Assignment title
11/05/2020	Weather Instruments

Instructions

OUTCOMES: I CAN IDENTIFY SOME WEATHER INSTRUMENTS AND WHAT THEY MEASURE.

SUGGESTED TIME DURATION: 30 MINUTES.

TASK: AFTER FOLLOWING THE ONLINE LESSON COMPLETE THIS TASK:

CHOOSE 5 WEATHER INSTRUMENTS REVIEWED DURING THE LESSON. FOR EACH INSTRUMENT STATE WHAT WEATHER FEATURE IT MEASURES AND THE UNIT OF MEASUREMENT.

CORRECTION: TASK WILL BE CORRECTED BY MS

SUBMISSION: SEND AS A PDF OR WORD DOCUMENT AND SUBMIT ON MY SCHOOL.

DUE DATE: 11th May, 2020.

Good examples exist. iEARN, the International Education and Resource Network in Spain, is a virtual network that offers a menu of over 150 projects, which teachers can integrate into their existing curricula while millions of students globally join to collaborate. Independent research shows that iEARN positively impacts students' levels of motivation, self-esteem, intercultural awareness and interpersonal skills. Similarly, Sugata Mitra's research has not only shown evidence for a radical instructional approach in schools with teachers simply asking 'big questions and students getting into groups to find the answers' but also cultivated such learning spaces around the world.

Simultaneously, decision-makers must also consider the diversity of students and other limitations like lack of connectivity or hardware, digital competencies among teachers, and encourage creative pedagogy. School closures are likely to impact schoolchildren's performance in key subjects, their learning setbacks during the summer break, and, potentially, delay achieving some learning outcomes as from next scholastic year. Some forecast a "Covid slide" as children move up school levels. However, this perceived urgency means that we are still thinking in terms of pre-pandemic times.

While setting the learning objectives and outcomes, education leaders can expand the 'goal posts' by lowering grade-level expectations, creating new deadlines for grade-level achievement, and simply letting learning carry on without clearly defined breaks. Self-paced and project-based learning will organically lead to continuous learning rather than the typical 45-minute slots (virtual or offline) during three rigid school terms. Assessment can follow the project-based learning design. Collaborative spaces the self-directed and project-oriented learning will also change teachers' roles.

Ivan Illich, a philosopher and critic of the modern Western institutions, anticipated a world of 'learning webs' where individuals connect with others to share knowledge and learn from each other:

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> A good educational system should provide all who want to learn with access to available resources at any time in their lives; empower all who want to share what they know to find those who want to learn it from them; and, finally, furnish all who want to present an issue to the public with the opportunity to make their challenge known.

As a parent, I am tempted to regard the current distance learning as a temporary set-up that I hope will go away soon and we'll resume to 'normal'. But as a researcher in the field of education technologies, children and learning, I wonder whether this is a moment of transition and we have the chance to reimagine education.

Maria Montessori saw teachers as helpers in learning that is already happening, just like Jean Piaget and Lev Vygotsky saw the social environment as that which transforms learners to their greater potentials. Advancing networked technologies provide immense opportunities to step away from the standardized teacher-led systems of learning to 'webs' with diverse individual needs and interests. Many teachers already acknowledge the constructivist orientation to learning as opposed to a process where students are passive recipients of information, although their teaching methods seem to show the total opposite. Perhaps now is a chance to realign what theory and research evidence shows about learning regardless of conditions and put the good ideas to practice.

This post gives the views of the authors and does not represent the position of the LSE Parenting for a Digital Future blog, nor of the London School of Economics and Political Science.

Featured image: Photo by Andy Falconer on Unsplash