



(Re)considering Education Amidst and Beyond the Covid 19 Pandemic

To cite this article: Ylimaki, R.M. (2021) (Re)considering education amidst and beyond the Covid 19 pandemic. *eJournal of Education Policy*, 21(1).
<https://in.nau.edu/wp-content/uploads/sites/135/2022/01/Ylimaki.pdf>

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Abstract

This article summarizes findings from a panel of educational leaders in Arizona regarding the reinvention of education following the pandemic that began in the 2019-2020 school year. The author situates these leaders' perspectives in a global context that is heavily influenced by digitalization and globalization. It is argued that technology and virtual education can support positive educational and personal development in experience-rich, growth-promoting uses of technology. Evidence is provided of Arizona leaders' efforts to be forward-focused in envisioning how to promote, post-Covid, positive uses of technology and ensuring access and equity to education for all students. The author shares conclusions about the importance of relationships, flexibility, attention to issues of equity and access, and support for the social and emotional needs of students and teachers.

Keywords: education reform, progressivism, Dewey, equity, virtual education, social and emotional learning

"We had to shift overnight to virtual education. Many teachers were familiar with technology, but others were not. So many children, particularly those living on the nearby Native American reservation, did not have access to internet resources. Now we have shifted back to face-to-face, but children have been in a virtual education space for 18 months! We had to get back to basics, meaning we had to think deeply about the purpose for education and what that means." Arizona Latina superintendent

The above superintendent quote was representative of many others during a recent virtual conference of Arizona School Administrators in which Arizona leaders considered education amidst and beyond the Covid 19 pandemic. This article also draws on literature on education and pedagogy dating back to John Dewey (1917; 1938) and the roots of his education theorizing as well as current examples from Arizona school leaders and others to (re)consider the purpose and meaning of education. Thus, this article is organized into four main sections. First, I review the contemporary challenges for education and pedagogy. The next section presents examples from current Arizona leaders from the Arizona Professors of Educational Leadership (APEL) conference. The third section goes back to historical lessons about education, pedagogy, and democracy from earlier times of crisis to consider transformative possibilities for the contemporary situation. Finally, I propose implications for educational leadership.

Contemporary Challenges for Education and Pedagogy: International Perspectives

In March of 2020, the Covid 19 pandemic caused more than 1.6 billion children and youth to be out of school in 161 countries. And while schools have re-opened, Covid surges have forced leaders to pivot between virtual and face-to-face platforms. Many education scholars and media reporters have documented impacts of virtual education on children and youth, including losses in learning, increased dropout rates, and children missing social and emotional supports in schools. Some districts—and families—with more financial resources were better prepared to shift between platforms for online, face-to-face, and blended education and pedagogy albeit with many challenges for teachers and parents. In schools located in poorer communities, the situation was much more mixed and quickly laid inequities and inequalities bare. Fortunately, we can observe benefits from the pandemic shift to virtual platforms, including opportunities for more frequent communication among distant educators and technology-supported simulations. The crisis caused by the Covid-19 pandemic has had far-

reaching effects in nearly all social areas, including education. As Huber & Helms (2020) noted,

In the context of this new and challenging situation of digital learning caused by the Covid-19 school lockdown, information had to be provided instantly to inform education policy and practice. Some countries have had natural catastrophes (e.g., earthquakes, floods) that caused school closures in localized areas, but these did not necessarily lead to digital learning for weeks and months. There was limited knowledge in how to deal with the current situation and the challenges that arise from digital learning in this context." (p. 2).

Arizona school and district leaders experienced these challenges as many schools were closed for months in 2020.

Arizona Educational Leaders' Perspectives

In a panel of Arizona Educational leaders, four common themes emerged: 1) Flexibility; 2) Relationships for Student Engagement; Structural Inequities and Social Emotional Needs; and 4) Education and Pedagogy and Fears about a Virtual Environment.

Flexibility. The Arizona educators talked at length about the need for flexibility amidst ongoing transitions to and from virtual education and face-to-face school. "Students, teachers, and principals needed to be flexible to meet student needs. Instruction really became an individual situation where the child's needs and educational environment determined the instructional approach. And the environment was not static; parents had to go back to work in an office and then came back into the home; the internet did not work consistently; a family member contracted Covid and that family member was the one who helped with school-work and so on." These evolving environmental situations for education affected children in a myriad of ways.

Moreover, there was a variation in how children engaged with virtual instruction, with variation dependent upon the teacher's comfort level with technology as well as the child's learning style and access to internet and technology resources. All panelists identified attendance as a major challenge. "We had so many children that were not showing up consistently in the online setting. We knew that we had to have better attendance as we worked on improving our online teaching skills. If kids did not show up, nothing else mattered. So, we (administrators) went door to door to make sure kids had technology, hot spots for internet if needed, and enough support to log on to school." Such challenges required flexible thinking as well as a willingness to do whatever it takes to bring school to students." As

one superintendent argued, leaders have always needed flexible thinking and an ability to adapt to complex and rapidly situations, but the shifts required amidst the ongoing Covid situation made “flexibility critical to adequately respond to rapidly changing needs of staff and students.” One teacher leader spoke of the importance of leaders providing “grace and understanding, flexibility and cooperation.” Prior to the onset of the pandemic, assessment practices were at the forefront of PLCs across the district as it evaluates learning and pedagogy.

During the pandemic, Arizona leaders also noted a shift in emphasis from acquired knowledge to deliberative engagement with knowledge using multiple sources, including images and the arts. Problem-based learning and flipped classrooms were frequently identified as instructional strategies aimed at flexibility, critical thinking and problem solving, but these strategies were met with resistance by staff.” Reasons for resistance included lack of professional development in these approaches as well as concerns about the need to develop students’ knowledge of content and strategies required by state standards. Teachers acknowledged that some students were not as engaged as they might have been in traditional classrooms. For some students, the platforms for social learning through technology were “just not the same” as in face-to-face settings. Others were more comfortable with school platforms closer to social media. Thus, as one superintendent put it, “We had to have multiple platforms, including Google classroom and Zoom as well as some asynchronous options available to meet individual student needs, and teachers needed to be flexible in their instructional approaches.”

Relationships for student engagement. Teachers and school/district leaders needed to build and develop relationships with students amidst a virtual environment. One superintendent argued that “the connections between students and teachers are vital for future success as students suffered greatly during the pandemic.” Another superintendent added, “Education is social, and I am not sure how the social aspect of learning can develop in a virtual setting. I watched many lessons and realized that the neural connections were there and could be nurtured and facilitated further.” Yet, the educational leaders/panelists also noted that, in many cases, students were not engaged because they were not present. They did not log on to the virtual education platforms. One teacher leader recounted, that her students “There were kids who would log in and they weren't actually there because their cameras were not on. They never responded when I spoke directly to them.” Educational leaders/panelists talked about the importance of peer support with teachers supporting one another. Educators relied on one another in social learning for technical assistance, collaborated to create Canvas content, discussed strategies to

teach and reach students, and for emotional support. Leaders also discussed the importance of maintaining relationships while schools remained closed, and leaders remaining in contact with all staff, "You know, we were not having staff meetings in the same way, but I think I think our leadership did a great job of still finding a way to navigate those relationships....In some cases, we had new principals leading schools online. They had to try to get to know families and teachers in a virtual setting. It was very difficult, and there was a range of success in these efforts." Despite strong relationships and flexible thinking to aid student engagement, Arizona leaders acknowledged the major challenge with structural inequities that perpetuated differentiated access to technology and the internet.

Structural inequities and social emotional needs. The panelists agreed that the pandemic exposed long-standing structural inequities with technological infrastructure, such as equipment and access to high-speed internet, throughout many of their communities. Closely related, while all families experienced major disruptions to their lives, the impacts were not universal. The inequities that cut across classrooms and communities have contributed to broad disparities in the losses, trauma, and isolation that many students and educators have endured, particularly on Native American reservations. As one superintendent argued, "Many students live in multi-generational housing, which puts Indigenous peoples and their families, especially the Elders, at risk. High mortality rates among certain vulnerable groups with elder care givers to our students has been traumatic for our learners." Another superintendent concurred, "Survival mode has been the norm for so many families, including lack of essential services, running water, electricity, internet, and home that have multigenerational families. Such challenges with living are not conducive for virtual learner set up." Importantly, panelists also agreed with parents that many parents also thought that "young people must have access to technologies and be familiar and at ease with their use since the contemporary world has increasingly complex information systems and social means of communication."

The panelists expressed concerns that these structural inequities that affect access to technology will continue. Further, Arizona leaders shared that increase in family trauma and the need for counselors and nurses are social emotional that will require time for families and entire communities to heal. These educational professionals maintained a keen awareness of the inherent socioeconomic inequities between students and how COVID's impacts further widened the disparities between disadvantaged students of color and their more affluent, white counterparts. As one panelist put it, "You drive up to the top of XXX [an affluent community of multimillion dollar homes] and our students live there at the top, then you also drive down and

you have multiple families living in a trailer home or in an apartment complex.” She went on to say that during the height of the pandemic, while teachers were “more forgiving of a lot of things,” they also often saw all students as the same. Because of a failure to understand the diverse backgrounds and circumstances of kids, teachers often attempted to meet all their needs in the same ways within a virtual environment.

Education and pedagogy and fears about a virtual environment. All panelists noted that the teaching and learning processes in their districts have undergone unique changes since onset of the pandemic. Many Arizona leaders expressed fears about the lack of social learning potential in a virtual environment. Moreover, all panelists emphasized that the move to virtual learning within their sites revealed a range in understandings about education and pedagogy for learning via technology. “There were trials and tribulations that came with it for students, teachers and support staff. Because the school was not utilizing technology to its full capacity prior to the shutdown the move to online learning came with trials and tribulations.” Similarly, another superintendent noted, “The support staff had to find a way to get each student a device that they could use which meant taking the chrome-book carts from across the school and reimaging and assigning them to students. The school then had to find a way to get these devices into the hands of the students. Unfortunately, getting the device to the student was only half the battle as a lot of students did not have access to the internet.”

Along with access challenges, teachers had to work together to reconfigure their lessons into the online format. “According to the technology trainer, teachers were not adequately trained for this switch either as they had only used technology as additives in their lesson as opposed to utilizing it to its full potential. The training that had to take place to make virtual learning a success took hours upon hours of teaching and training teachers so that they could successfully use the software; and even then, it still had its kinks.” Still another superintendent/panelist argued, “Teachers reported needing to take a crash course on how to properly use the virtual platform being used by XXX, and still need to utilize this application today. Virtual learning is a component that teachers believe will not go away post pandemic due to its ability to reach students from various locations.”

While the school closures were supported to save lives and improve the overall health of the community, learning is now faced with a sense of uncertainty, teacher insecurity, and the need to teach students through their preferred modality, virtual or face-to-face or a blended model. Panelists acknowledged that the pandemic has exposed weaknesses in teachers and learners as online learning has raised some serious concerns pertaining to its

efficacy and the reluctance of learners to embrace the substitution of in-person brick and mortar learning. Moreover, teachers and leaders recognized that curriculum needed to be personalized on the virtual platform but did not have the background to make these adjustments rapidly. "There were teachers who quickly learned to regret not taking Canvas seriously sooner and learning those skills when they could have". At the same time, panelists acknowledged that perhaps the shift to virtual exposed a variation in understandings about education and pedagogy.

(Re)considering Education

In the late 1800s and early 1900s, during another time of crisis from world wars and a pandemic as well as industrialization, John Dewey asked similar questions to those raised by the superintendent quoted at the beginning of this article. What is education and what is its purpose? The rapidly changing situation for schools and inequities exposed amidst the pandemic added additional concerns about societal inequities and social emotional needs of students and adults. In this section, I consider Dewey's education philosophy in broad terms and then connect his work to the contemporary situation, including particularly perspectives and concerns raised by the Arizona educational leaders. To begin, for Dewey, education required a humanistic approach that supported both individual development and social aims. In *My Pedagogic Creed*, Dewey (1897/1972) told us:

I believe that education is a regulation of the process of coming to share in the social consciousness; and that the adjustment of individual activity on the basis of this social consciousness is the only sure method of social reconstruction. ... I believe that in the ideal school we have the reconciliation of the individualistic and the institutional ideals. (p. 93)

Here Dewey (1897/1972) aimed at unifying the individual journey and goal of education: "education must be conceived as a continuing reconstruction of experience...the process and the goal of education are one and the same thing" (p. 91). Throughout his education theorizing over decades, Dewey emphasized the importance of the child and his or her individual growth in relation to social situations. As he argued in *My Pedagogic Creed*,

"I believe that the only true education comes through the stimulation of the child's powers by the demands of the social situations in which he finds himself. Through these demands he is stimulated to act as a member of a unity, to emerge from his original narrowness of action and feeling and to conceive of himself from the standpoint of the welfare of the group to which he belongs. Through the responses

which others make to his own activities he comes to know what these mean in social terms. The value which they have is reflected back into them. For instance, through the response which is made to the child's instinctive babbling the child comes to know what those babblings mean; they are transformed into articulate language and thus the child is introduced into the consolidated wealth of ideas and emotions which are now summed up in language."

For Dewey, a child's powers are situated within the social world. According to Dewey, the child's powers are exercised and developed through common social interactions. He used young children's language acquisition as an illustrative example of a child's powers developing through social interaction. A child's powers develop from individualized behaviors to socially conscious actions. Almost two decades later, Dewey's (1916) in *Democracy and Education*, Dewey specifically emphasized the child's powers of observation, recollection, and imagination.

Just as the senses require sensible objects to stimulate them, so our powers of observation, recollection, and imagination do not work spontaneously, but are set in motion by the demands set up by current social occupations. The main texture of disposition is formed, independently of schooling, by such influences. What conscious, deliberate teaching can do is at most to free the capacities thus formed for fuller exercise, to purge them of some of their grossness, and to furnish objects which make their activity more productive of meaning.

Dewey went on to argue, "We never educate directly, but indirectly by means of the environment." The influence of the environment operates through the habits of language, manners, good taste, and esthetic appreciation. These define the demands of social situations or the environment that contextualizes children's experiences in the world (Henderson, Castner, & Ylimaki, 2021). As Dewey put it, "In order to know what a power really is, we must know what its end, use, or function is; and this we cannot know save as we conceive of the individual as active in social relationships. But, on the other hand, the only possible adjustment which we can give to the child under existing conditions, is that which arises through putting him in complete possession of all his powers" (Dewey, 1897/1772, p. 6). For Dewey, the individual followed his/her own journey of growth yet also connected and developed in social relationships as part of a democratic way of living.

Importantly, Dewey also reminded us that education must recognize that the future is an open question. He continued later in *Democracy and Education* (Dewey, 1916),

With the advent of democracy and modern industrial conditions, it is impossible to foretell definitely just what civilization will be twenty years from now. Hence it is impossible to prepare the child for any precise set of conditions. To prepare him for the future life means to give him command of himself; it means so to train him that he will have the full and ready use of all his capacities; that his eye and ear and hand may be tools ready to command, that his judgment may be capable of grasping the conditions under which it has to work, and the executive forces be trained to act economically and efficiently.

In other words, Dewey (1897; 1916; 1938) encouraged continuous growth throughout life, and to avoid following a path to a point where learning could stop. In *Democracy and Education*, Dewey (1916) argued, in particular, that an education which only emphasizes the achievement of “external aims” (e.g., evidence from standardized test scores, grades, school letter grades, etc.) hinders students’ capacity for continuous growth and leads students toward viewing learning as an overly burdensome activity which they should seek to end as quickly as possible. Rather, in a Deweyan notion of democratic society, there is a reliance on ordinary individuals increasing their wisdom through experience. Reality for Dewey is constantly changing and there is no one with a monopoly on the knowledge of reality which means that democracy requires that everyone continuously grow and adapt to changing conditions. Dewey (1916, p. 493) summarized his views in *Democracy and Education*:

In sum, I believe that the individual who is to be educated is a social individual and that society is an organic union of individuals. If we eliminate the social factor from the child we are left only with an abstraction; if we eliminate the individual factor from society, we are left only with an inert and lifeless mass.

It should be noted that Dewey (1916) did not ignore the significance, nature and utility of subject areas, or outcomes. In fact, chapters of *Democracy and Education* are dedicated to deliberation on “geography and history” and “physical and social studies” as well as “play and work” and “vocational aspects of education.” Dewey communicates the aims of education for social direction, preparation, formation, and reconstruction. Consequently, education is “based upon a consideration of what is already going on; upon the resources and difficulties of existing conditions”, all of which require reflection and development or growth (democracy) (p. 493).

In Dewey's writings, the pedagogues mainly facilitate and support children to understand and to further social responsibility as democratic citizens. Dewey's concern more implicitly than explicitly includes the importance of an encouraging and respectful pedagogical relationship to a child in his notions of the "important role of the bond" (Dewey 1897, p. 3) between pedagogue and student (Kraus & Ylimaki, in progress). As Dewey noted in his pedagogical creed regarding 'methods':

I believe that the image is the great instrument of instruction. What a child gets out of any subject presented to him is simply the images which he himself forms with regard to it.

I believe that if nine-tenths of the energy at present directed towards making the child learn certain things, were spent in seeing to it that the child was forming proper images, the work of instruction would be indefinitely facilitated.

I believe that much of the time and attention now given to the preparation and presentation of lessons might be more wisely and profitably expended in training the child's power of imagery and in seeing to it that he was continually forming definite, vivid, and growing images of the various subjects with which he comes in contact in his experience.

Discussion

That Dewey had something to say to education in our times is clear in the comments from Arizona leaders concerned with technology and the issues that an environment and tools of digital technologies, while necessary during the pandemic, raise for students' growth and societal advancement. Amidst the pandemic and shifts to virtual education, some Arizona leaders, and other leaders worldwide (Huber & Helms, 2021) have articulated fears about young people spending much of their time in virtual worlds with school and social media and that these interactions distance them from real-life social experiences in ways that may have a bad influence on their development. At the same time, the Arizona educators argued that they and many parents also thought that young people must have access to technologies and be familiar and at ease with their use, since contemporary world has increasingly complex information systems and social means of communication. What are the dangers of education in a networked era and how does living in a technological culture inhibit individual and societal growth? How can digital technologies support pedagogy and ongoing individual growth in a democratic society? These large questions are

discussed in this section of this article, connecting themes from the Arizona leaders' perspectives to education theorizing, primarily from John Dewey.

Education amidst the pandemic required **flexibility** in terms of the changing educational environment from virtual to traditional face-to-face instruction. In other words, the pandemic (re)illuminated Dewey's education theorizing (1887; 1916) regarding the relationship between the individual and the educational environment as the environment evolved. Further, during the pandemic, Arizona leaders noted that children were more engaged online with images, art, problem solving ability, critical-thinking and analytical skills. They had to shift goals from knowledge acquisition to these aims, embedding content knowledge into inquiry, putting the child's interest in images and critical thinking at the forefront of lessons. Dewey supported this shift when he argued, "I believe that the image is the great instrument of instruction. What a child gets out of any subject presented to him is simply the images which he himself forms with regard to it (p. 463) and "I believe that if nine-tenths of the energy at present directed towards making the child learn certain things, were spent in seeing to it that the child was forming proper images, the work of instruction would be indefinitely facilitated (p. 463)." In some parallel, Dewey argued, "We never educate directly, but indirectly by means of the environment." The influence of the environment operates through the habits of language and esthetic appreciation. These define the demands of social situations or the environment that contextualizes children's experiences in the world (Henderson, Castner, & Ylimaki, 2021). While Dewey did not explicitly address the fluidity of the educational environment as experienced during the Pandemic, he acknowledged the importance of image and aesthetics to the pedagogical context. Many Arizona leaders noted that technology supported children's engagement through images with opportunities for simulations and aesthetic expressions.

The leaders all conveyed concerns about building **relationships** through social experiences that contribute to student engagement and even basic attendance. As one Arizona leader noted, "Education is social and I was not sure how the social aspect of learning could be developed in a virtual setting. I watched many lessons and realized that the neural connections were there and could be nurtured and facilitated further." Yet engagement depended upon students' actual presence in the virtual environment, and some children were not present. In Dewey's view, "The individual who is to be educated is a social individual and that society is an organic union of individuals. If we eliminate the social factor from the child we are left only with an abstraction; if we eliminate the individual factor from society, we are left only with an inert and lifeless mass."

Dewey's pedagogic creed provides advice for how to connect individuals and society. Thus, Dewey suggests that teachers/ pedagogues mainly facilitate and support children to understand and to further social responsibility as democratic citizens. In this sense, 'child-centered activity' is a relational concept. Dewey's concern more implicitly than explicitly features the importance of an encouraging and respectful relationship with a child (Dewey 1897, p 3). As Arizona leaders noted, technology can become a resource for social relationships, but we have more to learn about how to foster relationships through technology.

Social inequities and social emotional needs. The pandemic exposed long-standing structural inequities with technological infrastructure, such as equipment and access to high-speed internet, that presented barriers to relationships with some students. While all families experienced major disruptions to their lives, the impacts were not universal. The inequities that cut across classrooms and communities have contributed to broad disparities in the losses, trauma, and isolation that many students and educators have endured, particularly on Native American reservations in Arizona.

Arizona leaders shared that increase in family trauma and the need for counselors and nurses are social emotional that will require time for families and entire communities to heal. These educational professionals maintained a keen awareness of the inherent socioeconomic inequities between students and how COVID's impacts further widened the disparities between disadvantaged students of color and their more affluent, white counterparts. She went on to say that during the height of the pandemic, while teachers were "more forgiving of a lot of things," they also often saw all students as the same. Because of a failure to understand the diverse backgrounds and circumstances of kids, teachers often attempted to meet all of their needs in the same ways, using the same narrow set of tools albeit through technology.

Dewey's writings are not explicit about **social inequities**, but in a broad sense, he emphasized culture in education and argued that education required a humanistic approach that supported both individual development and social aims. A number of scholars have more explicitly applied principles of culture in culturally responsive teaching to leadership (e.g., Horsford et al, 2011; Johnson, 2006; Johnson, 2014; Scanlan & López, 2014). Frequently cited culturally responsive practices include 1) emphasizing high expectations for student achievement; 2) incorporating the history, values, and cultural knowledge of students' home communities in the school curriculum; 3) working to develop a critical consciousness among both students and faculty to challenge inequities in the larger society; and 4)

creating organizational structures at the school and district level. In the wake of the pandemic, Arizona leaders also identified the importance of equitable and inclusive access to technology and the internet.

According to Arizona leaders, teachers were not adequately trained for this switch either as they had only used technology as additives in their lesson as opposed to utilizing it to its full potential. Arizona leaders / panelists also acknowledged that the pandemic has exposed weaknesses in teachers and learners as online learning has raised some serious concerns pertaining to its efficacy and the reluctance of learners to embrace the substitution of in person brick and mortar learning. Dewey provided advice about personalization of the curriculum for children when he stated, "What conscious, deliberate teaching can do is at most to free the capacities thus formed for fuller exercise, to purge them of some of their grossness, and to furnish objects which make their activity more productive of meaning."

Conclusions and Implications

Educational leaders in Arizona and around the globe are (re)considering school and education for the growth of individuals and society in the wake of the pandemic, digitalization, and globalization. Drawing on Dewey's frame of education theorizing as articulated in *Democracy and Education* and *My Pedagogic Creed* to consider digital technology and virtual education for their educational value. Technology and virtual education can support positive educational and personal development in experience-rich, growth-promoting uses of technology. Importantly, these positive uses of technology can be linked to broader concerns for young people developing the capacities needed for democratic citizenship in an increasingly culturally diverse state, nation state, and globe. Arizona leaders are looking forward, considering how we might promote positive uses of technology and ensure access and equity to education for *all* students. Education theory from Dewey, complemented with culturally responsive practices, are basic to these efforts. Technology is also a powerful resource for education and pedagogy that supports all student to grow as part of a collective democratic society in a future that is an open question and changing rapidly. As the Arizona leaders argued, many teachers and administrators were not prepared for the rapid and fluid educational changes that accompanied the pandemic.

Implications for educational practice amidst and beyond the pandemic include flexibility in how we provide education with virtual components and options for teachers and students and building pedagogical relationships within and beyond technology. Educational leaders at all levels (classrooms, schools, districts, states, nation states and transnational organizations) need to educate and advocate for education that is equitable and just, supporting

individual and social growth and alleviating inequities in virtual and face-to-face environments. Such transformative educational leadership will need preparation and development that considers what we have known about education as well as what we have learned amidst the pandemic. The Arizona Professors of Educational Leadership within the Arizona School Administrators Association that sponsored this conference is committed to the education theory-practice relationships, collaborative partnerships, and research needed to (re)consider education and leadership amidst and beyond the Covid-19 Pandemic.

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