Five Things Not To Do When Schools Re-open

by Pasi Sahlberg -- June 3, 2020

This post is part of our series entitled Teaching and Learning During a Pandemic, in which we invite guest authors to reflect on the challenges of the Coronavirus pandemic for teaching and learning. Our guest today is Pasi Sahlberg, Professor of Education Policy at the Gonski Institute at the University of New South Wales in Sydney, Australia. Other posts in the series are compiled here.

So much has been said already about teaching and learning during the Covid-19 pandemic that it is hard to say something new. More focus on social and emotional learning, student and teacher wellbeing, authentic assessments, distance learning with technology, relationships in schools and recess during school days. Fewer high-stakes standardized tests, less unproductive consequential accountability, more direct instruction in school, and less rote textbook learning. All these ideas were presented already before this crisis, but people see that the time is right to transform schools after the pandemic is gone.

Rather than add more to the already exhaustive list of ideas for schools post-pandemic, I want to suggest five things that we should not do when schools re-open. These five things are collected from my numerous conversations and debates during the past few months about the implications of the Covid-19 pandemic for schools, teachers, students and parents. My basic assumption is that schools change slowly, even when pressured by external shocks like the pandemic. I think that the underlying emotion in this devastating turmoil, which by now has affected healthcare, education, economic systems, and the daily lives of billions of people, is fear.

Many are afraid losing their health, the lives of loved ones, their jobs, their dreams, and their futures. What most parents probably expect from schools now is safety and stability, not revolution or change. I like many others think that now is the time to reimagine schools. But I am afraid that making these dreams come true at scale will be very difficult. But if real change is to have any chance, I offer these five suggestions of what not to do. I have long believed that in education policymaking what we stop doing is as important as what we should do. In this playful spirit I offer the following *'5 Don'ts*.

1. Don't think that kids only learn when they are taught

In the midst of the first wave of the Covid-19 pandemic the international weekly newspaper the Economist published an article about how school closures might hurt economies around the world. The article noted: "If eight-year-olds' learning stops until September, they could lose nearly a year's maths attainment, according to first estimates." My immediate response: Don't think that students wouldn't learn were they not in school. At the moment it is too early to say how school closures have affected students' learning. Most researchers agree that learning from home has amplified already existing inequalities and, therefore, that those children who need school more than others have probably suffered the most. But children will keep on learning even if they are not taught. Most likely there will be more students than we think who have learned beyond expectations

when they have had peace and quiet to do so in their own ways. As the curriculum expert Bill Pinar reminds us, *"Not instruction, not learning, but study constitutes the process of education."* Students learn knowledge and skills through the struggle of study in school and at home – everyone is capable but not always willing to do so.

2. Don't worry about kids' losses on school tests

Annual standardized tests were cancelled this year in the United States, England, Australia, and in many other countries. This has left some parents wondering whether their children have made adequate progress in school. In Australia, one study went as far as trying to calculate the amount of loss when children didn't go to school for seven weeks. In New South Wales, for example, disadvantaged students in ninth grade have lost 1.6 weeks in reading and 2.3 weeks in mathematics. Not so fast, mate. Professor David Berliner, who is one of the most prominent experts to comment on these concerns, wrote in a recent blog post that while school is important, non-academic skills such as work habits, sports related competences, social skills, leadership, and locus of control are more powerful than academic skills (e.g. literacy and numeracy) in life outcomes. In other words, children who love to read, design and build things with Legos, explore the internet to learn about insects and the nature, practice playing guitar or other instruments, or use their imaginations to play outdoors would not see any loss in their school test scores by learning and doing these things at home. Berliner comforts those worried parents and teachers by telling them: *"If children are cared for emotionally, have interesting stuff to play with, and read stories that engage them, I predict no deficiencies in school learning will be detectable six to nine months down the road."* Furthermore, as I and others have demonstrated using years of data from large-scale international student assessments, there is little or no relationship between the amount of instruction students receive and their test scores. We need to let go of the myth that seat time equals learning. So, no worries, let the children play.

3. Don't expect kids to be ready to continue where they left off

Never before in the history have the schools of 1.5 billion children been unexpectedly closed at the same time. As this happened in April, most children continued learning from home using digital platforms or hardcopies provided by teachers, or by relying on their parents or grandparents to be guides and coaches. We don't know yet how these children experienced this disruption, but we do know that it has not been easy for many of them. Physical separation from their teachers is one thing, but emotional distancing from friends and peers for weeks, and lockdown at home with parents, is quite another. Therefore, when children return to school, don't expect that they will be ready to continue learning where they left off when schools closed. While social distancing is the tool that helps 'flatten the curve,' moving forward students now need three new 'R's' at school: relationships, respect, and responsiveness. Only after that can a renewed 'learning curve' begin. We need to focus not on some generic 'post-pandemic student' but instead concern ourselves with the complexity and diversity of classrooms, while accepting that the pandemic hits the most vulnerable hardest. Since February Covid-19 has left over 40 million Americans jobless, more than 100,000 people dead, and millions of children hurt in a country where a quarter of children lived in poverty prior to the pandemic. These children will not be ready to learn and thrive unless they feel physically and emotionally safe and protected at school. I agree with colleagues who have called for giving top priority to child and teacher wellbeing in schools before expecting that they will be able to return to business-as-usual in school learning.

4. Don’t consider recess as a low priority

Currently, only 12 U.S. states have passed requirements for daily recess in schools, requirements that typically amount to 20-30 minutes per day. Many American school districts have reversed recess policies to add more minutes to teach reading and mathematics. When schools re-open it would be easy for education authorities and school boards to consider recess as a low priority when they look for remedies to catch up on learning time missed due to the pandemic. That would, however, be short-sighted. Educators and medical experts have unanimously emphasised the importance of daily recess. One large survey found that more than nine of ten primary school teachers’ in the U.S. believe that recess promotes students health, wellness, and social development. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) say that recess benefits students by increasing their level of physical activity, improving their memory, attention, and concentration, and reducing disruptive behaviour in the classroom. All things considered, don’t view recess as a low priority. Quite the opposite, as we suggested elsewhere: make sure all children get more of it.

5. Don’t expect there will be a ‘new normal’ anytime soon

There are high hopes now that when schools re-open they will, finally, really change. Linda Darling-Hammond, who called it 'A New Deal' for education wrote, that “This pandemic puts a stark light on an emerging truth—education as we know it is over, and we must think of 'school' in deeply different ways.” I agree with her and others that simply picking up where we were when schools closed and continuing business as usual when they re-open as if nothing had happened would not be smart. But this is not the first time we have hoped schools would really change. Such change hasn’t happened before and it probably won’t happen now unless we reimagine the change itself. I have three reasons to doubt that there will be a ‘the new normal’ that is significantly different from what we had before. First, schooling will not change without bold and brave shifts in mindsets as to how that change happens. Most of what we have heard by now is about ‘*what* should change,’ not ‘*why*’ or ‘*how*’ it should change. Second, the role of policy in transforming schools after the pandemic is probably much less effective than we think. If we really want to transform our schools, we should expect less from policy-driven reforms and more from the visionary leadership of principals, professional wisdom of the teachers, and passionate engagement of students as change-makers. Finally, after the pandemic, most governments will be under massive pressure to rebuild their economies and cut public spending. This will put schools between a rock and a hard place. But I have been wrong before and would celebrate being so again if the ‘new normal’ would come to describe entire school systems, not just some schools.