Living in a world of Uncertainty, Disruption and Accelerating Inequalities: Mapping a Tentative Intersectional International Education and Development Teaching and Research Agenda

A response from the Centre for International Education (CIE), University of Sussex[1]

The COVID-19 pandemic has affected all of our lives in complex and diverse ways. Since the beginning of lockdown measures in the UK, CIE members have met regularly to reflect on, discuss and plan for the implications on our research and teaching programmes at the University of Sussex. While this is in part a practical necessity, aimed at addressing the concrete challenges that we might have in our teaching, research and community engagement, it is also an ethical and political challenge for us to reflect on the implications of the pandemic for our work in the field of international education and international development in the Global South. This piece seeks to situate our ongoing discussions and reflect on present and future directions for CIE and the field of International education and development within which our work is located.

Pandemics (COVID19), Ecological Insecurities, Inequalities, Prolonged and Protracted Conflict, and Economic Shocks & Doctrines

CIE's central focus is on inequalities and social justice in and through education, and the COVID-19 pandemic has intensified those inequalities. Despite the pandemic being presented as a global and universal phenomena, the reality is that it has thrown into sharp relief the fault lines of the world's inequalities. Experiences of the rich and the impoverished have always been significantly different. COVID-19 has compounded the suffering of the poor by shocking their fragile ecosystem into meltdown and accentuating gender, race, class, and disability inequalities. It has also challenged utilitarian social, political and economic market privileging dogmas. The pandemic is not just a health crisis, it is a crisis of inequality and neo-liberalism, a crisis of disaster capitalism and decades of austerity programs and sustained attacks on fragile public systems and services provided by the state. The pandemic has forced governments to speedily develop economic and social policies that can guide citizens to the 'new reality' in order to minimise the spread and effects of current and possibly future threats, particularly in the social sectors of education and health. The pandemic has also revealed the fragility of the global system, the weakness of leadership in the international sphere, and the divergent responses of national states ranging from the 'do nothing' and 'take it on the chin' herd immunity thinking which has led to thousands of unnecessary premature deaths to much more protective and caring approaches, which have minimised cases and deaths – at least in this first wave. For some these are signs of divergent gender leadership

---

styles, for others ideological cleavages between left and right. These types of polarised responses are also reflected in the way powerful actors, both state and non-state have sought to use the 'crisis' moment to push through political projects to transform the post-COVID-19 world and strengthen their hand, in what Naomi Klein, in her bestselling book, called 'the shock doctrine'. In contrast, many social movements around the world are increasingly calling for no-return to normality, and for a 'new normal' that redresses the massive inequalities and injustices that pervade our world.

The pandemic has compounded the vulnerabilities faced by the most marginalised in society, with specific patterns of vulnerability located at the intersection of status, gender, class and race. Border closures have abruptly restricted mobility making it virtually impossible for asylum seekers to claim protection, bringing refugee resettlement programmes to a halt and leaving many thousands stuck at borders or in transit sites. Refugees and migrants are disproportionately represented in informal and precarious work and have been among the first to lose their jobs in the pandemic. Remittances, a crucial support to the lives of migrant families, and a vital source of income for developing countries, is predicted to fall by 20% in 2020 (World Bank, 2020). Refugees and displaced persons already have limited access to services, including healthcare and education; they have poor living conditions and exploitative work, all of which has intensified their exposure to risk and vulnerability.

In the midst of the pandemic, governments have already begun to set in place changes to the field of international education and development with adverse effects. One such move, in recent days, has been the UK government's decision to merge the Department for International Development (DFID) into the Foreign Office, a move which will see massive reductions in development assistance and the increased politicisation, commercialisation and militarization of UK AID – a trend that was re-ignited after 9/11 and has accelerated since the Brexit process with the aim of using aid as a sweetener for new trade deals.

The pandemic has not only revealed the ugly face of inequality but also been accompanied by deep seated racism and violence towards black bodies as in the killing of George Floyd. The recent upsurge of protest by the Black Lives Matter movement stands as a strong counterpoint and vision of solidaristic action at a time of increasing chauvinistic nationalism. It evidences the global thirst for justice and the pressing need for truth, justice and reparations not just for contemporary racism and its effects but its historical roots in colonial conquest, slavery and the very development of the capitalist global economy itself.

The context of the pandemic, the changes to UK aid and state violence against black bodies call on those in our field to reflect, consider and act. This document sets out to provide pointers to the ways in which we as the Centre for International Education position our work and our values.

Achieving the SDGs

The COVID-19 pandemic emerged five years after the global commitment to the 17 Sustainable Development Goals agreed by all countries at the United General Assembly in September 2015. These 17 SDGs – including the eradication of extreme poverty (Goal 1), zero hunger (Goal 2), equitable and quality education (goal 4), gender equality (goal 5) and reduced inequality (Goal 10) – seek to create a prosperous, peaceful and sustainable planet. However, the realisation of these goals, and in particular the education goal, is complicated by the COVID-19 pandemic for several reasons. Pandemics of health, like the degradation of

the environment, are global in cause, consequences and effects, but the responses have not necessarily been so. Commitment to partnerships as key to achieving the SDGs seem, in some cases, to have been eschewed in favour of national interest resulting in narrow nationalist approaches to education policy making, particularly in some countries in the Global North. The withdrawal of the USA from the World Health Organization (WHO) is one such example. Although the WHO still plays an important role in managing the pandemic globally by advising countries, there is tension between the global focus of multilateral agencies such as the WHO and the nationalist approach of some governments such as the USA. If the SDGs are to be achieved then sustaining progressive forms of multilateralism and coordinated global responses in a post-pandemic context is imperative.

Efforts to realise the ambitious agenda of the SDGs are made difficult in the midst of poverty, increasing inequality and economic disparity. The most recent assessment of SDG progress notes increasing inequality among and within countries; higher extreme poverty in rural areas than urban areas; rapid and increasing levels of environmental degradation and global warming; increases in gender-based violence in the home/community; rise in global hunger; and increasing deprivation, violent conflicts and vulnerabilities to natural disasters (United Nations Statistics 2019). Persistent global inequalities predate the pandemic. The simple reality is that even prior to the pandemic, "*more than 820 million people regularly go to bed hungry of whom about 135 million suffer from acute hunger largely due to man-made conflicts, climate change and economic downturns*" (United Nations 2020). Inequality and conflict have been features of many countries in the Global South such as Libya and Yemen, for example. In this already debilitating context, the current pandemic intensifies and accelerates the effects of poverty and inequality. With this pandemic, achieving the SDG ambitions of equality and prosperity is a heightened challenge: the lives and livelihoods of the impoverished face ruin and the fragility of the global economy accelerates inequalities.

A further major concern for global education efforts to achieve the SDGs, and the education SDG 4 in particular, is that both domestic education resources and international aid may be redirected from education to respond to the pandemic. It is important to acknowledge that even before the pandemic, international aid to education was stagnating (UNESCO 2017), a trend that is likely to be intensified as governments focus on national economic growth priorities. In many ways, the COVID-19 pandemic, by accelerating inequalities and fraying the bonds of multilateralism, obstructs the SDGs. Further, it brings into question existing global priorities and commitments for tackling inequities, as many countries have redirected international aid towards domestic needs.

False promise and blind alleys: Worrisome education trends

The pandemic and the events of recent times behoves us to consider what is desirable and valued and valuable in our teaching. The COVID 19 pandemic has revealed three worrisome teaching and learning responses. First, a remarkable feature of the debate about the impact of COVID-19 and education responses is the strong focus on educational content. Rearranging school timetabling, extending the school year and increasing teaching hours for each learning area focuses education policy attention on the loss of learning content, measured by the amount of time children are expected to spend on learning. Underpinning this understanding of education in times of crises is the notion of learning as curriculum coverage. In other words,

school closure as a response to the pandemic is understood as the loss of learning content due to insufficient time for covering the content specified in the curriculum. A narrow focus on the curriculum and content of learning ('cognitive learning') is the current concern globally, with much talk about the '*learning crisis*' and '*learning poverty*'. The notion of 'loss of learning time' assumes that only content learning happens in school. This obsession with curriculum coverage suggests a narrow understanding of the purpose of schooling. While the concern with learning content is understandable, a narrow focus on the loss of learning and a learning gap approach limits the vision and purposes of education, as learning is much more than the learning of content. It is equally about socialisation, developing relationships and learning social and civic skills for navigating life in a democratic post-schooling context. Second, a Content-focused curriculum, on which much online learning relies, tends to instrumentalise education and learning, reducing the expansive notion of education quality merely to content mastery and advantaging those who have the support and capacity to self-study. Advocacy of online learning masks the serious digital divide between and within countries. Research undertaken by the UNESCO Teacher Task Force (2020) notes that in sub-Saharan Africa, "*89% of learners do not have access to household computers and 82% lack internet access*'. Third, the pandemic has also resulted in an increase of public-private partnerships (PPPs). The way in which a catastrophic crisis, whilst potentially offering the space for a progressive education agenda, ends up reducing the idea and practice of public education is best illustrated in the USA after Hurricane Katrina demolished most of New Orleans in 2005. New Orleans initially took control of public schools, later turning them over to non-profit charter schools and ending the trade union contract (Harris 2020). Further, online content and support is often commercialised and privatised, increasing the cost to governments and learners and their families. As government fiscal costs increase post pandemic, the privatisation of education is likely to become part of the 'new normal'.

Challenging education beliefs and approaches

The pandemic and the recent events have upended ways of doing and being and becoming. It has revealed most starkly the fault lines of the social, political and economic order. The COVID-19 pandemic also presents us with the opportunity to rethink orthodoxies and long-held education dogmas in diverse ways and opens possibilities for reconfiguring society and education in new ways. India like many other countries provides an example of how COVID-19 may effect change, particularly in high stakes examinations. In India, the pandemic disrupted the significant Grade 10 and 12 board exams which have been integral to their education since colonial times (Nawani 2020). The exams were not primarily about learning, but rather about control. Similarly, many other countries including Indonesia, Micronesia, Mongolia, Myanmar, Palau, Thailand, Tonga, Uzbekistan, Viet Nam have sought to develop alternative approaches to exams and validation of learning, e.g. reducing the number of exams, appraisal of student learning portfolios without exam results, to assure progression and promotion between school stages/phases or entry to universities (UNESCO 2020). Mexico introduced a compensatory assessment alternative to tests and quizzes of greater interest (e.g., student learning portfolio assessment, no end-of-year exam for the 2019-2020 school year) (UNESCO 2020). Other than exams, positive approaches to learning such as radio lessons, distribution of books and other printed materials to learners at home, may provide alternative ways of providing education in challenging times. Furthermore, one other way in which dogmas have been challenged is that the opening of school under conditions of Social Distancing Measures (SDMs) requires a serious ramping up of education budgets, particularly

in areas where there has been little education investment. COVID 19 and the reopening of school is holding up a mirror to the chronic underfunding of school in poorer areas and pointing to the need to reprioritise education budgets. Simply because we have been 'doing education' a certain way for a long time does not mean it is suitable for now or the future.

Demonisation and racism: the search for scapegoats

Since the commencement of the crisis, certain groups have been demonised and 'othered' as responsible for the spread of the pandemic. Historically, scapegoating has long been orchestrated towards minorities: Jews blamed for the outbreak of the Black Death in Europe (McNeil Jr. 2020); Haitians blamed for AIDS in the USA (Yong 2016). In India, state discourse and right-wing fascism have crafted an Islamophobic narrative in which Muslims are responsible for the spread of the virus. The physical violence perpetrated towards Muslims in India has also taken place through social media. Hashtag #CoronaJihad, trending on social media sites, has been circulated by officials from the country's ruling party. China and Chinese people have also been vilified as the point of origin of the virus in Europe and the UK, and not least in the USA, where Donald Trump has drawn on a racist discourse to deflect his own catastrophic mismanagement of the crisis. The ethno-nationalism that has surfaced in this pandemic belies the fact that in many countries, the impoverished and vulnerable minorities have been most affected. For example, in the UK, the Black, Asian, and Minority Ethnic (BAME) community has been the most adversely impacted. Allied to the process of 'othering' has been a strong chauvinistic nationalism pervading the discourse surrounding the virus. Individual states have turned obsessively self-interested in terms of national needs such as vaccines, ventilators and protective personal equipment (PPE). A global pandemic has provoked a return to narrow versions of nationalism, including 'vaccine nationalism'. The pandemic has thus unleashed a policy response that retreats from the idea of collective public global goods and threatens the achievement of the SDGs, and the possibility of global solutions to global problems. And in this context, what is needed are policy responses which recognise the structural violence and injustice meted out to the marginalised, the impoverished, and minorities, and crucially, are actioned, so working towards a progressive education response. And the Black Lives Movement Protest powerfully narrates the oppression and injustice meted out to the many by those in power.

Teachers

Public and policy discourse tends to frame teachers and teaching in deficient ways, with teachers presented as the education problem. This is revealed in the current discourse of teachers in the pandemic. Teachers are presented as unhealthy and with multiple co-morbidities as for example in South Africa. At the same time, they are asked to service learners in the absence of adequate health protection and support systems, including teacher professional development. During lockdown, teachers were often expected to shift to online learning without consideration of whether teachers (as well as learners) had either the facilities (laptops, data and bandwidth) or pedagogical content knowledge to facilitate learning online. Now that schools are reopening, teachers are required to teach using SDMs. It is assumed that teachers will seamlessly adjust their teaching in accordance with new protocols. A focus on learning as content ignores the psycho-social needs of learners and the idea of schooling as more than just an institution for learning the basics (literacy and numeracy). Nearly 1.2 billion learners have been directly affected by pandemic school closures (UNESCO 2020). The lockdown has had both physical and psychological effects on

learners, especially the poor. UNICEF (2020a) reports that when schools closed, crucial social services such as school meals were no longer available to vulnerable children. The closure of schools has affected the nutrition of approximately 350 million learners worldwide (UNICEF 2020b). Teachers need support, in order to in turn support learners through this unprecedented global crisis and that support needs to recognise that the teaching/learning process is a holistic and fundamentally social relationship.

Researching International Education and Development

Just as schooling – as a face to face physical process – has been halted during the lockdowns, so research has faced a similar disruption. Fieldwork, face to face interviews, focus groups, observations have all been suspended. International research workshops and training meetings postponed or moved online, and international conferences cancelled. All these things have forced us to think through alternatives and the ethics that underpins them. International travel bans mean the international relationships and partnerships with researchers in the Global South will become all the more important but how can we ensure that these are not based on old patterns of North/South inequalities and the reproduction of colonial patterns of exchange? How can we ensure that the already present division between Northern and Southern researchers as respectively data analysts vs data collectors, is not further entrenched? How do we build and sustain equitable relationships at a distance, through online processes that while useful often feel inadequate to the task of building inter-personal relationships that are so important in trust building? All these things and more require careful thought, reflection and solidarity as we move forward.

Similarly, how can we ensure that the coming wave of austerity measures does not disproportionately impact on researchers and potential researchers from the Global South? In our own University, the very few doctoral scholarships for non-UK/EU students were among the first to be suspended in an initial wave. This we believe is a mistake and reflects the uneven nature and effect of austerity reforms that needs to be resisted with a 'crisis-justice' philosophy that demands that cuts should not fall on the already most marginalised and vulnerable, but should be borne from the top down.

The Black Lives Matter protest has shone the spotlight on the marginalized and subjugated. In our field, we need to confront the fact that too many of our research and teaching institutions of international education and development, too many of our NGOS, and too many of our development agencies are white and male. How do we confront the White Development Studies Saviour complex in our research program and work? How do we ensure that the we attract and retain black researchers from and in the Global South and ensure that people of colour are senior researchers, scholars and professors and not merely research assistants and handmaidens?

And the COVID 19 pandemic has also alerted us to the need for more careful analyses of policy processes and policy choices made under the guise of crises and emergencies. We need to ensure that our research unpacks policy process and choices and who is involved to develop the knowledge base to address the current and future crises. In this, we need to ask how do we as field carry on our research in times of uncertainty and unpredictability

In term of research focus, we reaffirm our strong commitment to social justice orientated research committed to speaking truth to power and offering alternatives to contemporary 'common-sense' neoliberal solutions in education. Whilst maintaining our commitments to core research areas and themes that we have become known for: Gender, Teachers,

Inequalities, Conflict, Governance in education we will seek out opportunities to explore the impacts of the COVID19 pandemic and contribute to a Critical Research Agenda on the 'COVID19 and Education' debate. In doing this, we recognise the legacy of critical researchers in the field of International Education and Development that during the Structural Adjustment Policy period of the 1980s and 1990s, researched and evidenced the brutal policy outcomes of World Bank inspired fiscal and policy reforms on Education systems across the Global South, and provided the ammunition for social movements to resist them.

Developing an intersectional teaching and research agenda for social justice

The pandemic has engendered a narrow and instrumental focus on learning. The desire to return as quickly as possible to a 'new normal' has resulted in quick, hasty and often half-baked approaches to education. In relation to this, we need to ensure that in our teaching we confront the narrow and reductionist constructions of learning crises and learning poverty to protect, promote and nurture a more humane and holistic notion of education and education quality. Such a notion will ensure that at the heart of teaching and learning is the commitment to tackling every and all forms of racism, xenophobia, sexism and prejudice of the kind that the pandemic has stoked, often deliberately inflamed by political leaders. It will also emphasise psycho-social learning, supporting both learners and teachers.

And a starting point is to ensure that we reflect a curriculum that affirms and recognises marginalised voices and identities. The curriculum in our field is often shaped by narratives that project a narrow knowledge base, centred in and on the concerns of the Global North. For example, too many of our international education and development programs draw on a narrow range of authors and sources. But a decolonised curriculum is more than just substitution or additive, but one in which there is space for dangerous conversations with our students and between ourselves about race and gender, to challenge the actions complicit in the continuation of tragic realities (Yancy 2017) and in which pedagogy enables us to move from knowledge as regulation to knowledge as emancipation (Santos 2014). '*A recentred decolonised curriculum is then more than additive … It is about disrupting established canons of knowledge, engaging in pedagogies of discomfort, engendering radically critical conversations and seeing the epistemic at the heart of the struggle for decolonisation that confronts space and time, geography, body and positionality*' (Sayed at al 2019). Further we need to engage with the idea of the university, who it represents and how.

More importantly, in engaging with teaching and learning choices post-pandemic, we need to avoid opening up education options and modalities in the new normal which allows the private sector and privatisation to take hold. We need to ensure that the proprietal thrust of online and blended learning in schools, universities and home tutoring does not undermine the idea of education as a common good. Our teaching should support efforts for a global intellectual commons post pandemic (Tricontinental Institute for Social Research, 2020) in which knowledge which addresses pressing global problems are not protected by the need for profit or locked away under insidious intellectual property rights regimes which favour the powerful.

We need to be considering radical humanist agendas that understand the practices of teaching and learning as a relational sociality-based activity involving multiple relations: between teachers and their learners; teachers and the school, parents, community and society; and teachers and the world which they and their learners inhabit. Such an agenda understands teachers as agents but agents operating within particular socio-cultural contexts,

and teacher practice as shaped by and shaping the structures of society. Teaching as a radical humanist agenda implies teachers taking a normative stance in favour of social justice and equity in and through education, and teaching as a pedagogic encounter that provides a wide holistic account of what learning constitutes in contrast to the narrow instrumentalist view of learning outcomes as student attainment. Such an agenda should draw on the great tradition of thinkers in the Global South with care and empathy for learners and for the well-being of teachers themselves at the core.

In these ways, as teachers and lecturers in the field in the field of international education and development, we see the pandemic as opening up our community to difficult conversations and subjecting our dogmas to critical scrutiny. Yet to date, this is not the case, as many institutions narrowly seek to refocus their teaching and learning to, as in in the UK, mitigate what they see as the 'loss of international student fee income' through blended and online learning without considering the huge fees charged. As a community we should avoid being complicit, in our pedagogy, our institutional practice and our collective voices, in returning to a 'new post-pandemic normal' that is driven by the logics of the past albeit in changed circumstances not of our making.

Conclusion

As we move out of this initial first wave of the COVID19 pandemic we reaffirm CIE's commitment to theoretically and ethically informed policy-relevant research, teaching and public engagement that places the Global South at the centre of our focus and concern, and builds on the radical traditions of the University of Sussex's commitment to International Development Studies, whilst recognising its serious flaws, colonial legacies and prisms. Such a social justice agenda seeks to conduct research and teaching in support of efforts to tackle the most egregious effects of disaster capitalism and neo-liberalism. And in this, as a community of scholars, we stand with social movements, teacher unions, the Black Lives Movement, women's organizations, the LGBTIQ++ community, and all marginalised groups who have been, and continue to be, rendered silent and invisible, and in so doing, we confront our own privileged positioning in the field. We stand at the cusp of a breaking dawn in which the possibility a new human-needs agenda wrestles with a greedy capitalism which seeks to return to a new normality as much it has done so after the 2008 recessions. As CIE we believe that our research, teaching and public engagement affords us a space to teach and research in ways in which we can, albeit in a small way, contribute to an alternative imaginary focused on a commitment to eradicating inequality. In writing this piece, written through a collective endeavour, we wish to animate and reinvigorate our fields' commitment to social justice which has been muted at times, and silent, at other moments. And the field of international education and development studies, positioned in this way, opposes and rejects the changes underway in the UK to subjugate development to narrow national interest.

August 3, 2020

References:

McNeil Jr, DG. (2020, January 9) Finding a scapegoat when epidemics strike. *The New York Times* [online]. Available at
https://www.nytimes.com/2009/09/01/health/01plague.html

Nawani, D. (2020) Impasse caused by pandemic offers room to rethink board exams, find alternatives. *The Indian Express* [online]. Available at https://indianexpress.com/article/opinion/columns/board-exams-coronavirus-pandemic-students-educ ation-6393932/

Tricontinental Institute for Social Research (2020) Ten-Point Agenda for the Global South After COVID-19: The Twenty-Fifth Newsletter [online]. Available at https://www.thetricontinental.org/newsletterissue/25-2020-ten-point-agenda/

Santos, Boaventura de Sousa. 2014. Epistemologies of The South: Justice Against Epistemicide. Boulder: Paradigm Publishers.

UNESCO. (2020) Startling digital divides emerge in distance learning. United Nations [online]. Available at https://en.unesco.org/news/startling-digital-divides-distance-learning-emerge

UNICEF. (2020a) UNICEF Global COVID-19 Situation Report No. 2 [online]. Available at https://reliefweb.int/report/south-africa/south-africa-covid-19-situation-report-no-2-1-15-may-2020

UNICEF. (2020b) Mitigating the effects of COVID 19 pandemic on food and nutrition of school children. United Nations [online]. Available at https://www.unicef.org/media/68291/file/Mitigating-the-Effects-of-the-COVID-19-Pandemic-on-Food-and-Nutrition-of-school-children.pdf

United Nations. (2020) Sustainable development goals: SDG 2, No hunger. United Nations [online]. Available at https://www.un.org/sustainabledevelopment/hunger/

Yancy, G. 2017. On Race: 34 Conversations in a Time of Crisis. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Yong, E. (2016) *How One Man Was Wrongly Blamed for Bringing AIDS to America* [online]. Available at https://www.theatlantic.com/science/archive/2016/10/how-one-man-was-wrongly-blamed-for-bringin g-aids-to-america/505412/].