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EDUCATION AND THE PANDEMIC:

Engaging in epistemic humility to question assumptions, institutions, and knowledges

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ABSTRACT

Education systems are the formal institutionalisations of the knowledges and values our societies privilege, who they privilege, how, and on what terms. They are imbued with assumptions. These assumptions inform how systems are structured. Assumptions frame collective and individual interactions within education systems, which ultimately determine how individuals, and particular groups of individuals, are inserted therein. The pandemic has exposed existing global and local inequalities, non-binary dynamics of inclusion and exclusion, and dysfunctions of education systems. What has been revealed is as applicable to education systems that were widely assumed to be 'educationally secure' prior to the pandemic – usually signified as those of the 'West' – as it is to systems that were largely characterised as precarious or dysfunctional. The paper argues that the global scale and severity of the education disruption challenges taken-for-granted distinctions that privilege systems of the 'West' as referential for 'the Rest'. It argues that the existing overarching technicist knowledge regime is inadequate for recovery, and proposes an alternative approach.

Scope, approach, and structure

1. Analysing education and the pandemic: context and core concepts

2. Explicating assumptions

3. The relationship between assumptions, mental models, and institutions in education

4. Non-binary dynamics of inclusion and exclusion

5. Moving Beyond the Technocratic: reconsidering 'evidence' and knowledges for a way forward

Conclusions

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The conceptual framework developed in this paper is an exercise in epistemic humility. It employs two heuristic strategies to analyse education responses to the pandemic. The first is to explicate the underlying assumptions framing the global

The paper argues that the global scale and severity of the education disruption challenges taken-for-granted distinctions that privilege systems of the 'West' as referential for 'the Rest'.

education emergency; and the second is to engage with the implications of privileging certain knowledges and individuals and groups in the institutions underlying formal education systems. The paper outlines and critiques three dominant assumptions that frame public discourse on the pandemic: (1) the premise that 'we simply do not know'; (2) the view that the pandemic has been a 'great equalizer'; and (3) the belief that evidence will inform policy action. It proposes that the way forward is to move beyond the technocratic to consciously and critically re-examine which and whose knowledges have been legitimised in

the dominant regime, and from there to begin a concerted effort at coalescing excluded knowledges and perspectives and integrating broader methodologies.

SCOPE, APPROACH, AND STRUCTURE

The hope is that the conceptual framing articulated in this paper may encourage those involved in education research, policy, practice, and administration to engage in 'epistemic humility' (Parviainen, Koski, & Torkkola, 2021), or the explicit acknowledgment of the limits of knowledge in the face of rapidly evolving emergency during a time with heightened competing exigencies to act. In essence, the paper is an invitation to engage, consciously and critically, in reflexivity within these limits.

The initial drafting of the paper in 2021 occurred exactly one year since the COVID-19 emergency was declared a global pandemic by the World Health Organization. Its genesis was an invited address for the panel, 'Impact of the COVID-19 crisis on the nature of evidence and research methods', for the global Building Evidence in Education (BE2) donor working group conference in October 2020. The panel was meant to interrogate the following central questions.

- What new data/evidence/knowledge is needed and for what purposes?
- How is the Covid-19 crisis impacting research methods and the nature of knowledge production?

The paper does not offer an operational guide or a concrete set of definitive answers to these questions. Employing a critical perspective that favours the inclusion of dominantly excluded or suppressed knowledge perspectives and research approaches responsive to context, process, problem, and aspirational and functional goals (Torres & Nyaga, 2021), it would be short-sighted to do so. Instead, it became clear that considering these questions would be inadequate without *substantially engaging with the nature of the assumptions and the institutions underlying education systems first*.

The centrality of assumptions in this conceptual exercise informed my writing process. Consistent with the effort to explicate underlying assumptions, the practical challenge was to strip bare my own guiding assumptions to the roots of the conceptual knowledges that tacitly informed my thinking. This was an exercise in self-reflexivity (Mouzelis, 2010; Torres & Nyaga, 2021) designed to engage in epistemic vulnerability and humility. Thus, atypical of most papers and much outside the usual practice of my scholarly work, there are relatively few references outside of the core conceptual framing. The freedom to proceed in this way was necessary and transformational as it enabled a sharper process for developing this paper.

Section 1 considers the context of the global education disruption caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. It attempts to decentre the myth of the stability of 'Western' education systems as referential points against which 'the Rest' are analysed and situated through technicist legitimisation. This section also introduces two heuristic strategies to chart a way forward. It foregrounds the political nature of education as framed by essentialising grand narratives and examines the relationship between the assumptions and institutions underlying education. Further, it outlines inclusion and exclusion as non-binary processes and outcomes, which is relevant to understanding how unexamined assumptions and institutions can have,

and perpetuate, differential effects on various individuals and groups of individuals in their claims to and experiences of education.

Section 2 employs the first heuristic strategy to explicate three assumptions underlying global discourse in the early stages of pandemic response. It argues that threats of ‘non-knowledge’ (Daase & Kessler, 2007) coupled with a need for political actors to act with urgency, can have the effect of elevating temporary, provisional assumptions to totalising grand narratives.² The incentives for political expediency are connected to a broader technicist knowledge regime.

Sections 3 and 4 take a more theoretical turn. Section 3 argues that assumptions are central to the institutions underlying formal education systems. Assumptions are the key building blocks of individual and collective ‘mental models’. Mental models rest on assumptions, which in turn, through formal and informal individual and collective learned processes and knowledge-making, influence how and which institutions are set. Section 4 considers inclusion and exclusion as non-binary, non-permanent outcomes and processes that are framed by multiple collectivities of social identifiers. Inclusion and exclusion dynamics can result in what I call ‘synergistic empowerment’ at one end of a spectrum, and ‘hard-core exclusion’ (Kabeer, 2000) at the other, and can impede aspirational societal goals of education.

Having applied the first heuristic strategy in Section 2, and detailing core concepts in Sections 3 and 4, Section 5 employs the second heuristic strategy of engaging with the implications of privileging certain knowledges, individuals, and groups. It outlines the technocratic approach. It then proposes a way forward, raising a set of critical questions to begin the process of collective reframing of public discourse and action. Section 6 concludes with final remarks.

1. Analysing education and the pandemic: context and core concepts

Termed a ‘generational catastrophe’ by United Nations Secretary-General António Guterres, the global education emergency caused by COVID-19 resulted in education disruption to a magnitude hitherto unexperienced in modern history. It has been framed in global and domestic public discourse as ‘shocking’. In scale, it certainly is – approximately 1.6–1.7 billion learners initially excluded at the peak of mass school closures in April 2020, and 500 million children never reached by emergency remote learning initiatives.

However, the effects of mass education disruption on this global scale should be less surprising. The extensive existing research on education interruptions, education in emergencies, and education exclusion and inequities is clear: we can expect to see learning loss, earning loss, and negative consequences on social development, life opportunities, social protection, health and welfare, amongst other harms. Furthermore, we can expect that these effects will be compounded for marginalised and vulnerable groups; that is, for those who, pandemic notwithstanding, disproportionately experience persistent education exclusion, and who experience relative inequities even when they are enrolled and attending in all contexts and systems. Alongside sustained education disruption, these individuals and groups are experiencing (or continue to further experience) double or multiple devastations, as the health and socio-economic effects of the pandemic are also more severe on them.

Thus, rather than accepting the effects of education disruption as shocking outcomes, the central premise here is that the pandemic simply lays bare the extent of global and local inequities, existing exclusions, and dysfunctions of education systems. Some of these will deepen, whilst new ones will be created. This premise is as applicable to countries with education systems that were widely assumed to be ‘educationally secure’ prior to the pandemic, as it is to those characterised as precarious or dysfunctional.

This first set of education systems has been positioned in dominant global education discourse and architecture (i.e., the matrix of global education organisations, institutions, policy frameworks, and practices) as primarily those of ‘Western’ countries; and the second, as those of the majority world. Given the extent of the global education emergency and the scope of its continuance, the pandemic should compel us to challenge such characterisations. A critical discursive view would expose this dualistic characterisation as, itself, the product of colonial and neo-colonial enterprises affixing the centrality of the perspective of ‘the West and the Rest’ (Hall, [1993], 2018), that is propagated by myths about the relational

2 In the simplest sense, the term ‘non-knowledge’ is used here as Daase and Kessler (2007) state the antonym of knowledge ‘in order to reserve the term “ignorance” and its pejorative connotations for a specific form of non-knowledge’ (p. 412).

superiority of 'the West'. This dynamic is rooted in the construction and legitimisation of the particular knowledges and knowledge regimes which are then taken for granted and valued over others, and thus, become dominant.

The education systems of 'the West', thus, become referential points against which 'the Rest' are analysed and relationally situated. The valued knowledge regime is increasingly likely to consist of decontextualised practices of accountability, measurement, and standardisation, using and creating evidence that prioritises and exalts units of quantifiable data over others, with an explicit view towards large-scale comparisons (Gorur, Sellar & Steiner-Khamsi, 2019). These signifiers of privileged evidence and knowledge-making practices are constructed in reference to the proffered educationally secure systems, which in turn, legitimise that knowledge and validate the dominance of the referenced systems.

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Global and domestic education policy and practice have been increasingly propagated as technical enterprises. Earlier research and analysis focused primarily on the flows and inequities of unidirectional knowledge transfer, i.e., from the 'West' to 'the Rest'. More recently, the focus has shifted to the complex inter-relationships and opaque networks of an increasingly diverse array of state and non-state actors involved in education governance (Ball, 2017; Ball & Juneman, 2012; Gorur et al., 2019). The knowledge-making processes that arise are likely grounded in narrow, 'technicist' approaches to data and evidence (Ball, 2017; Gorur et al., 2019). Inequitable partnerships often advance decontextualised modes of research and knowledge production. They tend to perpetuate the dominance of 'Western' actors or are skewed towards a small number of countries, even in 'Southern'-led initiatives (Asare, Mitchell, & Rose, 2020; Madsen & Adriansen, 2021).

The central premise here is that the three core concepts used in this paper – assumptions, institutions, and non-binary dynamics of inclusion/exclusion – operate within an increasingly 'technocratic' (Lyotard, [1979], 1984) context for education. It has become increasingly apparent that explicitly engaging with the *existence* of underlying assumptions, and with the assumptions themselves, is crucial to moving beyond viewing education as a mere technical enterprise and for education recovery.

First, the pandemic has exposed the centrality of the assumptions underlying education institutions. Following a new institutional perspective, institutions, which consist of formal laws, regulations, and structures, as well as informal norms and practices, characterise how particular individuals and groups are inserted into systems. Individuals and groups are inserted by virtue of social identifiers, some which are privileged and others which are not, in specific societies at particular points in time. Accordingly, institutions frame the terms on which individuals and groups can benefit from or lay claim to entitlements, rights, and resources (Fraser, 1989; Kabeer, 2000) – in this case, education.

It has become increasingly apparent that explicitly engaging with the existence of underlying assumptions, and with the assumptions themselves, is crucial to moving beyond viewing education as a mere technical enterprise and for education recovery.

This paper takes assumptions as the key building blocks of individual and collective mental models that underlie the formal and informal institutions, which in turn, structure formal education systems (Denzau & North, 1994).

Institutions are the humanly devised constraints that structure human interaction (North, 1990). This has led to the development of two heuristic strategies in this paper: (1) *explicitating emerging assumptions* in global public discourse surrounding the pandemic and the global education emergency; and (2) *engaging with the implications of privileging certain knowledges and individuals and groups* in the institutions underlying formal education systems.

Second, the pandemic has brought into focus the role of assumptions in framing global and domestic education policy discourse and action. As we move forward in the context of divisive and charged discourses framing education and pandemic responses, it is important to stress the inherently political nature of education and education research, policy, and practice and the implications of normalising essentialist 'grand narratives' (Lyotard, [1979], 1984). Grand narratives, when based on uncritical assumptions, can adversely influence collective mental models and the underlying institutions, or the 'rules of the game' (North, 1990), of education systems. The interplay of unexamined assumptions can perpetuate differential effects on various individuals and groups of individuals in their claims to and experiences of education.

The following section applies the first heuristic strategy to explicate three dominant assumptions emerging from public discourse on education and the pandemic.

2. Explicating assumptions

The interplay of the underlying assumptions and institutions of education systems with the dynamics of inclusion and exclusion as non-binary processes and outcomes can reveal threats of 'non-knowledge'. Daase and Kessler (2007) identify knowledge and non-knowledge as independent but linked (p. 414). In the simplest terms, there are:

- known knows – knowledge on the basis of which strategies can be developed;
- known unknowns – knowledge about what we do not know, i.e., 'uncertainties that can be tamed analytically and reintegrated into the decisionmaking process as calculable risks' (Daase & Kessler, 2007, p. 412); and
- unknown unknowns – non-knowledge 'about what we do not know and cannot know', but which also includes 'the knowledge we do not want to know. These are the things we could know but rather decide not to know by forgetting, suppressing or repressing them' (Daase & Kessler, 2007, p. 412; emphasis added).

My interest is in this latter aspect of non-knowledge, which approximates 'agnotology' or 'wilful ignorance' (Parviainen et al., 2021). I have a further interest in the revelatory potential of a consciously critical approach to explicating underlying assumptions.

Threats of non-knowledge can enable temporary working assumptions to be raised in status to totalising grand narratives by political actors. This process is heightened in emergencies by the paradox governments face of acting with urgency but with incomplete information and in contexts of uncertainty, against the possibility of inaction: 'During the crisis, political decisionmakers fall easily into inaction when pressures boil over due to a lack of (and inaccurate) knowledge [...] Both knowledge and non-knowledge are used not only in implementing political decisions and justifying them in public, but also for creating room for national and international manoeuvres needed to take or stay in power' (Parviainen et al., 2021, p. 234). Thus, the incentives to act in crisis favour expedience. Given the nature of the dominant legitimised knowledge regime, technicist solutions are favoured. In such a climate, the temporary or uncertain nature of many working assumptions is downplayed, and they are, instead, propagated as relatively fixed, universal truths that provide clear-cut justifiable rationales for action (or inaction).

The interplay of unexamined assumptions can perpetuate differential effects on various individuals and groups of individuals in their claims to and experiences of education.

Employing the first heuristic strategy, I explicate three assumptions which seemed to underlie much of the global discourse propagated in the early stages of pandemic response. I also connect them to the three core concepts used in this paper. I do not maintain that these are the only assumptions in play. It is likely others have emerged. It is also quite probable that each is differently reframed in specific contexts and continues to evolve.

Assumption 1: 'We simply do not know.' The pandemic thrust the world into uncharted territory, which requires entirely new knowledges to prompt action.

This assumption most strongly draws on the lure of non-knowledge and, in some instances, propels us towards concerted agnotology. It legitimises inaction and confusion, providing a veil for inadequate policy responses. The severity and scale of the pandemic, causing near universal mass disruption of education, cannot be underestimated. However, it is simplistic to state that there are no applicable knowledges. This is dangerous discourse.

Accepting this assumption maintains dominance of the knowledges of the 'West' over the 'Rest' and favours technicist data and research, rather than stressing the temporality of non-knowledge (Parviainen et al., 2021) or turning towards excluded or 'othered' knowledges. This assumption ignores the history of educational research and the disciplines, institutions, actors, education systems, and architectures that can, and should, be (re)appropriated, decolonised, localised, and made more inclusive.

There is a rich scholarly literature, dating back 50-60 years and in some cases significantly earlier, on pedagogy, learning, governance, inequities, social cohesion, community action, and localised experiences among other topics. There are global and domestic education architectures comprised of systems, governments, laws, covenants, and frameworks. There are local and grassroots organisations, as well as traditional systems of organising learning and education that can be mobilised to generate relevant knowledge. Of course, such mobilisation requires acknowledging the skewed nature of the underlying institutions framing education governance and processes, and then actively inserting the wealth of knowledge and experience from and across 'the Rest', arising from existing emergency-affected contexts, traditional and local knowledges and stewards, and a range of academic and non-academic organisations that produce and commission research and coalesce other ways of knowing.

Assumption 2: 'We're all in this together.' The pandemic is the great equalizer. The pandemic does not discriminate.

This assumption fundamentally negates the complex non-binary dynamics of social inclusion and exclusion. It ignores the fact that individuals and groups of individuals are inserted within systems and institutions that are framed in ways that both enable synergistic empowerment and advantage for 'privileged insiders' (Kabeer, 2000), and perpetuate disadvantage for others. It erases the complex socio-economic and historical circumstances of individuals and groups that structure lived experiences and life opportunities. Inevitably, since starting points before the pandemic were unequal, the effects of the pandemic will also be unequal and inequitable. Individuals and groups will be affected differentially.

Emerging research shows that the negative health and economic effects of the pandemic disproportionately affect marginalised and lower-income groups. Experiences of school closures have been more severe on some populations, in some countries, in some regions and locations within countries, on some school communities, and on some individuals and groups of students than on others. In practical terms, the positioning of different groups within existing education systems prior to and entering the pandemic was inequitable regarding their initial and continued access and the quality of provision available to them. The effects of disruption will be most severe for those facing 'hardcore exclusion' (Kabeer, 2000) due to multiple intersecting factors such as ethnicity, relative household wealth, disability status, language, among others. We must ensure that these individuals and groups are not silenced, and that their experiences are accounted for, acknowledged, and addressed.

Assumption 3: Evidence will inform policy action.

This assumption is based on a simplistic linear association between knowledge creation, knowledge mobilisation, and policy action. The uptake of evidence is political. It can be couched in technicist discourse of resource constraints, which may be more valid in some contexts than others. Evidence can be ignored. It can be delegitimised in favour of other interests. The process further relies on actors with influence, and increasingly, networked into the appropriate power structures for relevant knowledges, seen here as knowledges aiming to reduce education inequities, to be legitimised and acted upon.

However, the processes through which knowledges are legitimised as 'evidence', how that 'evidence' is framed, and how and which type of 'evidence' is mobilised into policy action are messy. These processes operate through competing interests and political regimes that may be antithetical to broader inclusionary aims. This will require the 'unthinking' of what is considered dominant and legitimised evidence (Bacevic, 2020). Questioning underlying assumptions can lead to questioning whether the evidence that informs education policy action is indeed oriented to broader aspirational and inclusive goals.

Questioning underlying assumptions can lead to questioning whether the evidence that informs education policy action is indeed oriented to broader aspirational and inclusive goals.

The following sections follow a more theoretical approach. The central premise is that while education is often approached in a technicist manner in high-level policy and planning fora, it is, in fact, deeply cultural, social, economic, and political. This requires deep conceptual engagement with the institutions and the institutional processes underlying education systems. In the next section I focus on the relationships between assumptions and mental models with institutions, which are key

to understanding how education systems are structured. In Section 4, I focus on inclusion and exclusion as non-binary outcomes and processes as central to defining individual experiences and collective outcomes in and of education.

3. The relationship between assumptions, mental models, and institutions in education

Education systems are the formal institutionalisations of which knowledges and values our societies privilege, who they privilege, how, and on what terms. They are imbued with assumptions. These assumptions inform how systems are structured. They also frame collective and individual interactions within systems and how individuals and particular groups of individuals are inserted therein.

Assumptions, thus, are building blocks central to the broad cognitive schema or 'mental models' that individuals construct to make sense of the apparent disorder in their environments, and to reduce uncertainty to function in society. Mental models have a fundamental relationship to ideologies and institutions. Ideologies, as conceived here, are rationalised, taken-for-granted myths, based partly on falsehoods and partly on a creative assemblage of facts, that are normalised.³

Education systems are the formal institutionalisations of which knowledges and values our societies privilege, who they privilege, how, and on what terms. They are imbued with assumptions.

From a new institutional economics perspective: 'we must understand the relationship[s] of the mental models that individuals construct to make sense out of the world around them, the ideologies that evolve from such constructions, and the institutions that develop in a society' (Denzau & North, 1994, p. 4). Together, '[m]ental models, institutions and ideologies all contribute to the process by which human beings interpret and order the environment. Mental models are, to some degree, unique to each individual. Ideologies and institutions are created and provide more closely shared

perceptions and ordering of the environment' (Denzau & North, 1994, p. 21).

From this perspective, ideologies and institutions are classes of collectively shared mental models. Crucially, neither individually held mental models, nor ideologies, nor institutions are naturally occurring. They are humanly created. They are the results of formal and informal learned processes and, in the case of ideologies and institutions, are processes of *collective learning and knowledge-making*. Thus, 'shared mental constructs... guide choices and shape the evolution of political-economic systems and societies' (Denzau & North, 1994, p. 5). Put another way, institutions - formal education institutions in this case - comprise collective societal choices that are formalised and furthered through formal processes of authorisation (Hogwood & Gunn, 1984; Rizvi & Lingard, 2009) and legitimisation (Ball, 2017) as well as through informal norms, practices, and values.

From sociological and new institutional economics lenses, institutions are not neutral. They are, in fact, created in the interests of privileged groups – those with power and dominance. It follows, that formal education systems and governance processes are systematically designed to favour established local and global orders, and to privilege and legitimise those knowledges. These are key tenets of the literature of the sociology of education which do not require belabouring here.

A new institutional economics lens is less commonly applied to the study of education and education governance. It is, however, useful for framing institutions as neither rational nor efficient, but as intimately related to power, as 'they [institutions], or at least the formal rules, are created to serve the interests of those with the bargaining power to devise new rules' (North, 1990, p. 16). Change is possible. But, from a new institutional economics perspective, it will be incremental. From a sociological perspective, it will be paved with struggle and coordinated efforts at delegitimization. In the face of large-scale upheaval or emergency, radical change is also possible, but its effects are unlikely to be long-lasting unless it is quickly institutionalised.

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Thus, if we take as the starting point that assumptions are key to framing individual and collective mental models, which in turn, are furthered by ideology and are the building blocks upon which institutions are devised, then the work of

3 My basic outline here draws on Hall's ([1993], 2018) analysis of Foucault's classic work on ideology and power.

explicating assumptions, as performed above, is key. Such an exercise identifies potential windows for change, however incremental, and, if we are fortunate and tenacious, potential opportunities to institute radical change.

Assumptions guide our decisions and actions. They shape our systems – and they will also frame recovery. When woven together, assumptions shape the ‘metanarratives,’ i.e., the totalising explanations or grand theories (Lyotard [1979], 1984), that characterise the form and function of education systems. Metanarratives, used to explain complex social phenomena, are attractive. They reduce otherwise complex disparate, fractious, and intricate ideas, events, and phenomena into seemingly comprehensive explanations that signal universal ‘truths’ or values. Metanarratives render complexities comprehensible. They are, in the truest sense, ‘discursive.’

Assumptions can be dangerous because they may be incomplete, uncritical, or colonial and can mute certain voices. These attributes of assumptions can lead to non-knowledge or ignorance that is not simply benign but is at the core of delimiting collective political action, individual agency, or claims to rights and entitlements as a structural condition. That is, these types of assumptions can lead to socially constructed wilful ignorance, also known as ‘agnotology’ or ‘the epistemological state that concerns the conscious, unconscious and structural production of ignorance, whether brought about by neglect, forgetfulness, myopia, secrecy or suppression’ (Parviainen et al., 2021, p. 233).

The legitimacy of dominant assumptions grows when seemingly harmless discourses of neutrality and/or inclusiveness and universality are propagated. When critically analysed, however, it becomes clear that dominant assumptions favour established power structures and self-interests of individuals and groups who benefit from privileged inclusion therein. There is room for agency in rejecting dominant assumptions or crafting new ones; however, this route is contested and often subject to broad-based delegitimization.

But, if they are consciously critical and deeply reconsidered, alternative assumptions have the potential to provide a reorienting framework for reimagining education and its role in society and recovery. Alternative assumptions can allow education to realise its potential to reframe institutions to go beyond inserting individuals and groups on the basis of privileged or devalued collectivities of social identifiers. As will be discussed in the next section, this reorientation hinges on recognising inclusion and exclusion as both outcomes and processes that are non-binary and non-permanent, and that significantly affect the lived experiences of individuals and groups – and, when coalesced collectively, affect aspirational societal outcomes of education.

From this perspective, ideologies and institutions are classes of collectively shared mental models. Crucially, neither individually held mental models, nor ideologies, nor institutions are naturally occurring. They are humanly created. They are the results of formal and informal *learned* processes and, in the case of ideologies and institutions, are the processes of *collective learning and knowledge-making*.

4. Non-binary dynamics of inclusion and exclusion

Inclusion and exclusion are framed by multiple collectivities of social identifiers (e.g., race, gender, caste, language, religious affiliation, class affiliation, etc.) of individuals and groups of individuals, which structure and constrain their insertion into all areas of institutional life (Fraser, 1989; Kabeer, 2000). The specific combination of these collectivities can result in what I term here as, ‘synergistic empowerment’ at one end of a spectrum, namely the fortuitous combination of social identifiers that may be institutionally valued or privileged, and ‘hard-core exclusion’ (Kabeer, 2000) on the other. Hard-core exclusion is ‘the product of the “destructive synergies”’ (Gore & Figueiredo, 1997 cited in Kabeer, 2000) between different kinds of disadvantage. Hard-core exclusion occurs when principles of unequal access in different institutional domains reinforce, rather than offset, each other, creating situations of radical disadvantage’ (Kabeer, 2000, p. 88). According to Kabeer:

The intersecting nature of different forms of exclusion and inclusion results in the segmentation of society, and in clusters of advantage and disadvantage, rather than in a simple dichotomy between inclusion and exclusion [...] we can think in terms of *privileged inclusion, secondary inclusion, adverse incorporation or problematic inclusion, self-exclusion and ‘hard-core’ exclusion*. Privileged insiders are those who occupy the central positions within mainstream institutions of a society, and whose collective influence shapes the framework of rules and norms within which all the key decisions of social life are made. ‘Secondary’ insiders occupy a more peripheral

position in relation to this group, but they nevertheless enjoy some of their privileges [...] Then there are the more complicated categories of inclusion and exclusion. There are those whose problem has been identified as less one of exclusion, than of the problematic terms on which they have been included' (2000, p. 87; emphasis in original).

Thus, inclusion and exclusion are neither binary, nor one-time, permanent states. They are continuously negotiated and temporal, determined by the specific time and space in which particular identifiers are valued or devalued, recognized or mis-recognized (Fraser, 1989). Synergistic empowerment is when the combination of social identifiers is valued to such an extent that individuals and groups experience privileged inclusion. On the other end of the spectrum, destructive synergy

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is when the combination of social identifiers is devalued such that individuals and groups experience hard-core exclusion. Within this spectrum, some may be also incorporated on adverse or problematic terms, and others as 'privileged insiders' (Kabeer, 2000). Both ends of the spectrum and the permutations therein, significantly affect life opportunities by systematically enabling or denying claims to entitlements, rights, and resources.

It follows that individuals and groups of individuals are differentially inserted into formal education systems structured by institutions, which are normatively derived. Processes of inclusion and exclusion significantly structure experiences of schooling, and of the formalization of knowledge-making and learning. They determine, for example, which children have access to which types of schools (and in some contexts, if at all), for how long, and how consistently.

Once in schools, the 'hidden curriculum' comprising normative patterns of interaction (e.g., school-parents; student-student; teacher-student, etc.) and the dominance of certain knowledge over the exclusion of other knowledges in the formalized curriculum significantly shapes education experiences and outcomes, and upholds the validity of legitimized knowledge. Thus, the hidden curriculum through 'basic rules and tacit assumptions' (Apple, 2004) and the formalization of ideology in the education process, serve to maintain dominant values, interests, and power structures, unless otherwise rigorously and consistently challenged in the hopes of attaining the aspirational goals of education. As a way forward, the second heuristic strategy, which is to engage with the implications of privileging certain knowledge(s), individuals, and groups is proposed and applied below.

5. Moving beyond the technocratic: reconsidering 'evidence' and knowledge(s) for a way forward

A technocratic characterisation of systems will value performativity in accordance with narrow, simplistic, seemingly straightforward processes over aspirational or, in the case of education, potentially radical and liberatory goals. As Lyotard ([1979] 1984) cogently expresses, the technocratic may even be:

...cynical, not to mention despairing: *the harmony between the needs and hopes of individuals or groups and the functions guaranteed by the system is now only a secondary component of its functioning.* The true goal of the system, the reason it programs itself like a computer, is the *optimization of the global relationship between input and output – in other words, performativity.* Even when its rules are in the process of changing and innovations are occurring, even when its dysfunctions (such as strikes, crises, unemployment, or political revolutions) inspire hope and lead to belief in an alternative, even then what is actually taking place is only an internal readjustment, and its result can be no more than an increase in the system's 'viability'. The only alternative to this kind of performance improvement is entropy, or decline (pp. 11-12; emphasis added).

Lyotard further contends that from this view, education systems, like all systems, function internally to optimise rationality. From the technocratic perspective then, what 'counts' as data and evidence and what is valued as knowledge will be technician, as others have also argued. In education, decontextualised, standardised indicators focusing on inputs (e.g., types of facilities, numbers of teachers, etc.) and outputs (e.g., achievement levels, pass rates) are more likely to be stressed,

over the nature and 'stuff' of schooling processes (e.g., pedagogic practices, student-teacher/teacher-parent power relations, children's experiences) and longer-term societal outcomes (e.g., social cohesion, social mobility).

It is not the contention that input and output indicators are wholly unnecessary or meaningless. However, the over-reliance on decontextualised indicators to the exclusion of other sources that can shed light on experiences, processes, and broader aspirational goals and outcomes is insufficient. Furthermore, given varied pandemic effects on individuals and groups of individuals, the existing knowledge regime is inadequate for making meaningful change.

To put it simply, while universal enrolment and minimum standards of provision are undoubtedly necessary on the path to universal education, they are by no means a guarantee that the spirit behind the fundamental right to education for all is achieved.

Globally, the primary concern of development agencies, donors, and domestic governments, particularly in low-/low-middle-income countries, has been to increase enrolments into formal education systems. Increasing quality in nominal terms is a relatively recent secondary concern. Quality improvements are nominal because they are largely focused on increasing the supply of inputs and are less focused on the quality of schooling interactions and students' lived experiences. This approach has been legitimised within a dominant global education regime of narrow and prescriptive goal- and target-setting movements. To put it simply, while universal enrolment and minimum standards are undoubtedly necessary on the path to universal education, they are by no

means a guarantee that the spirit behind the fundamental right to education will be achieved.

Many existing large-scale comparisons in global education focus on participation and achievement. These include various measures of enrolment and relative learning levels in basic literacy and numeracy, which are important. The recent education emergency also necessitates an assessment of disruptions related to physical access to schools, days of instruction, and patterns of access to emergency education provision and services. Equally important are assessments of basic skills. Nonetheless, ongoing research on the ways students and households experienced, and continue to experience COVID-19-related disruption, matter greatly when addressing education equity. It is essential to build integrative perspectives that broaden the scope of what is considered evidence, move away from a deficit perspective, and examine instead the conditions and positionalities of those who have been most disadvantaged during and since the pandemic.

The second heuristic strategy requires explicit and collective critical reflection on assumptions and on the implications of privileging certain knowledges and individuals and groups of individuals in the institutions of formal education systems. Returning to new institutional theoretical principles, the results of such reflection must be enacted and institutionalised quickly. If not, alternative assumptions are unlikely to take hold, and systems are likely to revert to the status quo.

While there is no single analytic prescription applicable everywhere to everything and everyone, perhaps one of the most fundamental exercises is to *consciously and critically re-examine which and whose knowledges have been legitimised and valued, what has been counted as evidence, and what has been discounted as neither evidence nor knowledge*. We can begin by asking basic questions, such as: Whose perspectives have been privileged? Which methodologies and methods have been legitimised? Where are the dominant centres of knowledge production? Which research has gained influence? Which research has been mobilised into policy, and which has been excluded?

Next, we must *begin a concerted effort at coalescing excluded knowledges and perspectives and integrating broader methodologies*. This necessitates a rapprochement of academic, policy-oriented, and grassroots researchers, together with traditional knowledge stewards from the majority world and from colonised communities. We should seek a true opening of comparative research, knowledge generation, study, and partnership. The focus should shift from technicist, large-scale decontextualised and superficial comparisons to hermeneutics and collaborative learning and knowledge-making that address the specificity of education disruptions and inclusion and exclusion dynamics within local institutional contexts. Research and knowledge-making from this perspective would explicitly set out to tackle institutional inequities that produce hard-core exclusion. Its aim should be to radically alter the status quo.

Whose perspectives have been privileged? Which methodologies and methods have been legitimised? Where are the dominant centres of knowledge production? Which research has gained influence? Which research has been mobilized into policy and which has been excluded?.

Movement in this direction is critical, given the hyper-localisation of educational interactions during the pandemic. In many cases the locus of the formal education system has shifted to the level of individual households – the family became the very core of education provision. Household circumstances, their institutional positioning, became the framing context for education continuity. Given this, the evidence and knowledges we need for analysis far exceed the narrow scope of technicist endeavours. A concerted effort by UNESCO and others to advance these contextualized endeavours and coalesce these new knowledges and research transnationally would help us ‘follow knowledge as it travels across borders’ (Krige & Leonelli, 2021, p. 126). This approach is a valuable methodological and political tool that is particularly well-suited in cases of global emergencies.

6. Conclusions

The propositions in this paper fall outside the dominant global education knowledge regime framed by technicist discourse, both prior to and during the pandemic. Central to that process has been the legitimization of certain knowledge, the delegitimization of other knowledges, and the filtering and selective use of ‘evidence’ by influential actors. The argument here is that fundamentally, education is, and will remain, a messy and profoundly political sphere. Once we engage in a concerted and public exercise to question assumptions and collective mental models, and to recognize that the institutions governing and underlying education systems are not constructed to be rational and are, instead, the product of unequal power bargaining exercises, we may chart a way forward.

From this perspective, the way forward rests on a consciously critical approach to provide a reorienting framework to move beyond the technocratic – the capacity to reimagine education and its roles in society, recovery, and desirable futures. As an exercise in epistemic humility, the paper effectively employs two heuristic strategies: explicating underlying assumptions framing the global education emergency; and engaging with the implications of privileging certain knowledge(s) and individuals and groups in the institutions underlying formal education systems. This critical analysis of education and the pandemic calls for a concerted effort to coalesce excluded knowledge(s) and engage broader perspectives and methodologies in an effort to challenge rebalance and create anew the dominant knowledge regime.

This proposal has an aspirational goal to seize a new moment for education, which has the potential to enact radical rather than incremental change. For the best chances at institutionalizing such change, we must take quick collective action.

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