

Mourning our Losses: Finding Response(-ability) Within COVID-19

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In education, we have historically been intimately concerned with progress – particularly in the individual. Kieran Egan (2003) made this point in the context of the progressive education movement, and while Egan takes the critique of progressive models of education further than most, he is not alone. Indeed, many have critiqued the dominance of progressive education and its closely related psychological counterpart, developmentalism (Egan, 2005; see also Walkerdine, 1993; Whitty, 2009).

In a previous essay (Downey, 2019), I offered my own critique of developmentalism and progressive education as manifest in the popular concept of growth mindset (Dweck, 2000, 2016). Drawing on Ashwani Kumar’s (2013) writing around meditative inquiry as a counterfoil, I said that growth mindset was an internal psychological expression of a neoliberal economic obsession with growth. If we are always looking for a way to grow—a way to become better—I suggested, we miss who we are in any given moment. Kumar (2013) advocates for a self-inquiry aimed at accepting who we are in all our complexity and idiosyncrasy. This self-discovery is the ultimate aim of education for Kumar, and it is decidedly against the status quo of Western education. As noted, Western education is dominated by a concern for growth, progress and development. Indeed, these interconnected ideas form something of a doxa – a commonly held and widely accepted belief.

This doxa is structurally manifest in the project of schooling in myriad forms. Grade levels, which tacitly envision education as a linear progressive project steeped in Piagetian developmentalism (Egan, 2005), are perhaps the clearest example and also serve to highlight the persistent presence of industrial ideology (itself a doxa) within the structures of schooling. In the first century of the third millennium, well after such structures were first critiqued (e.g., Apple, 1979), the temporalities of schools are still bound within the industrial modalities of clock-time and bell-time (Rose & Whitty, 2010). Temporality, it should be noted, can be constructed as an axis of privilege (Saul, 2020). Those of us who can live according to the dominant expression of time gain access to unearned advantage by virtue of group membership, and those of us who live according to divergent temporalities do not. Temporality is, of course, only one of the many ways in which the doxa of Western schooling has systematically privileged some over others.

Today, the dominance of industrial and growth-centric ideology is amplified and shaped by the post-industrial nature of the economy and the so-called advanced (Braidotti, 2019), flexible (Sennett, 1998), liquid (Bauman, 2007), and neoliberal (Kumar, 2019) forms of capitalism which underpin it. Under this new regime of thinking, growth is still demanded, but the direction of that growth is meant to be adaptable to an ever-changing economy. The current movement toward entrepreneurial education, which has clearly taken hold in the Atlantic provinces (Hadley, 2017), is a particular expression of this. Entrepreneurial education is a precise marker of a neoliberal ideological intrusion into education, particularly in rural provinces. Where rural communities are

seeing increasing levels of outmigration and unemployment (Hadley, 2017), the push toward entrepreneurialism excuses the government from any obligation to help those community and places the burden of employment and financial security on the individual. The precarious nature of entrepreneurial employment has been well noted (Benjamin, Crymble, & Haines, 2017), as have other forms of neoliberal ideological intrusion into public schooling (Rodgers, 2018) and curriculum (Kumar, 2019).

Amid the global COVID-19 pandemic, some may suggest that the flexibility of the modern economy has saved a great deal of suffering. Certain sectors of the economy were and are able to continue more-or-less unchanged in terms of output because flexibility offers many people the option to work from home and on their own schedule. Education attempted to make a similar shift in many provinces, but the degree to which it has been successful remains to be seen, and preliminary discussions in some jurisdictions are not optimistic (e.g., Hobbs & Hawkins, 2020). The difficulty in making education flexible is precisely in the schizophrenic neoliberal pull between accountability and freedom—the system needs tight control over its students and teachers but also demands an adaptability in modes of delivery (Rodgers, 2018), particularly in the current moment.

The doxas of developmentalism, industrial structures, and neoliberalism in education have been well noted and critiqued in the literature, and the above should be taken as an illustrative gesture rather than a comprehensive overview.¹ The point of this essay is not to reiterate the well-worn critiques of the past, but rather to suggest ways forward. Indeed, the current moment has been called “unprecedented” by many. If such is the case, then education must be prepared to respond not with the doxas of the past, but with new possibilities for the future.

A folly of the current model of education is that it neglects the losses of learning. Where education is generally framed in the positive—as an endeavor of growth and progression—it is more accurately an ongoing series of *becomings*. Becoming is an ontological expression of learning rather than an epistemic one; education is not about the transfer of knowledge as much as the transition to new forms of being. Learning, when viewed in this ontological manner, is not always a net positive. In becoming something new, there is always a loss of something old (Nellis, 2018). We have, as a society and as a profession, generally neglected these losses, and the result can be felt under many names: psychological fragmentation, disconnection, and apathy to name but a few. “Loss calls for mourning” (Nellis, 2018, p. 55), and in mourning we find new ways forward.

Mourning is a space between what was and what will be. It is a transition to new forms of being, informed by the old. Mourning, then, provides a salient metaphor for the transitions that must occur both within education and society more broadly amid and after COVID-19. Mourning, in this regard, is an expression of what Rosi Braidotti (2019) names as *the affirmative*. Through the pandemic there has been loss, and loss must be mourned, but there is also opportunity for change. Where change is concerned, we must remember the way things were—particularly the social marginalization endemic to the fabric of society and schooling (e.g., Brayboy, 2005; Ladson-Billings, & Tate, 1995). The defining characteristic of Braidotti’s (2019) affirmative is the relentless capacity to take things as they are and work with them. This does not, however, mean that

negativity and critique are ignored—rather they are valued and used to inform the new. Indeed, the affirmative is driven by the negative; the push toward a future is informed by a critical understanding of the past.

As we move forward, then, I think we have an obligation to do so in the spirit of mourning and the spirit of the affirmative. First, the critiques of the education system as it was must inform whatever we create moving forward. Second, and relatedly, there must be an acknowledgement of what has been lost – both in learning and in society more broadly through the COVID-19 pandemic. Neither of these, however, should dominate our concern. Rather, affirmative ethics would suggest that we sustain these critiques and losses – keeping them close to us and mourning them – and then get on with the task of envisioning something better. Feminist scholar Donna Haraway (2012, 2016) names *response-ability* as the capacity for care and response. I read the current moment as a call for such response-ability and find it in the metaphor of mourning and in Rosi Braidotti's (2019) discussion of affirmative ethics. What comes next is anyone's guess, but guess we must because life will carry on and so will education.

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¹ For a more thorough discussion see Kumar, 2019, chapter eight.