What value do schools bring?

The accepted assumption is that schools are sites for learning and the role of educators to equip students with the knowledge and skills they need to be successful in the future. As Mitra (2011) states in a paper called “The Social and Economic Benefits of Public Education”:

The fundamental outcome desired for education is that it will pass on to each child the information and skills they will use throughout their lifetime. At its core, every school is a place where children learn what adults in the community already know, a place for the transmission of knowledge. (p. 6)

This is also reflected in the manner in which we evaluate schools and teachers. We give the students tests to figure out how much they have learned, against some externally developed criteria of how much they should know by what age. And we hold students and schools accountable for this through a variety of accumulated test results. But, what if this entire assumption (that schools are sites for learning) is wrong (or incomplete)?

If there is a hopeful prospect to the current COVID-19 crisis, it is that it has forced us to look at school differently. With over 97% of the world’s learners out of school, it has given us an opportunity to revisit the whole idea of what the value of school is in our social, cultural, and economic lives. Here are a few.
1. **Schools keep kids safe so that adults can go about their business running the economy**

The first and foremost value that schools bring to our world is an economic one, but not in an “investment in the future” sense, which is the typical argument made for investing in public education. For instance, an example of the typical economic argument for school can be found in Hanushek et al. (2016) who argue that:

When students learn more in school, they remain in the educational system longer and become more-skilled and-effective participants in the state’s workforce. (p. 17)

In other words, Mitra (2011) suggests that:

A population that is better educated has less unemployment, reduced dependence on public assistance programs, and greater tax revenue. (p. 5)

To be clear, we are not arguing against the long-term economic value of education. But we are suggesting, rather, that there is a more significant immediate economic value that schools provide, which we often do not pay attention to, and something that has come to the forefront due to the crisis. In blunt terms, schools allow parents to do the work of keeping the economy humming, what Jeffrey Young describes as the custodial aspect of schooling (2020). He writes that schools:

...take children and keep them safe and keep them secure and feed them, and whether a school is quote “good” or quote “bad,” whether the test scores are high or the test scores are low, pretty much at every school in the country parents can send their child and be secure that at the end of the day they will get their child back. And I think probably every parent in America, that’s what they’re missing. (para. 10)

The abrupt disappearance of this custodial aspect has significant economic implications. Epstein and Hammond (2020) have calculated that the cost of closing all schools and formal day-care centers in the U.S. is approximately around .1% to .3% of GDP, which equates to more than 50 billion dollars (give or take a few).

Additionally, the impact of these school closures is felt most by people who are already in precarious financial situation. The cost to society is exacerbated when we consider health-care workers (especially in health crises like we have now) where it is estimated that up to 19% of health-care workers would not be able to go to work if they had to take care of their children.

So, if we have to put a value on school, we need to take this multi-billion immediate economic benefit into account.

2. **Schools provide environments for emotional, civic, and social development**
Of course, that is not all that schools do. As Dr. Damian Bebell’s research on school mission statements demonstrates, “in almost every community, school means more than just curricular content and academic learning” (Bebell, 2020, para. 4). Although academic/cognitive development plays an important role in school mission statements, it is not as dominant as emotional, civic, and social development.

Teachers and educators become like second parents, or at least role models to students, providing them nurture and support as they grow and develop. Educators get to know students as developing individuals, helping them grow as humans and citizens.

Schools are also intensely social spaces. Ask any kid and they will tell you that schools provide places for friendship and company. There is a reason why kids wait in anticipation for recess like cats ready to pounce. During play, students learn to work with others and learn about navigating differences (cultural, economic, and more).

Schools are the petri dishes for our democracy. They are often the only places where students can explore alternative professional identities (from science to art in a variety of ways, whether in the classroom or through clubs and other social organizations). Schools allow students to experience play and creativity in relatively low-risk ways, whether in formal or informal contexts and whether in the playground or through participation in more formal organizations such as art and music clubs. Students can also engage in leadership activities through sports, participation in student groups, and more.

And maybe most importantly, students form their first real relationships. They make friends, and form cliques, and break up. They fall in love and, surprise, break up. Most first relationships start at school. Ideas about love and relationships that have a huge influence on the future are often formed through conversations and experiences at school.

3. **Schools are hubs for social welfare programs, often for those with the greatest need**

Apart from the social value of schools—making friends and learning to get along with others, living in a community, and developing personal qualities—schools are usually the first line of defense against the ravages of poverty. For instance, in the U.S., around 100,000 schools/institutions serve free or reduced-price lunch to approximately 26 million children. For many, this is the only consistent source of nutrition. Globally, 368 million children are now missing out on school meals.

The bigger issue is that schools today function as centers for social welfare programs—free and reduced lunch being just one of many initiatives. **Head Start** is another such program in the U.S., providing early access to education and health programs for young low-income students. Other programs include parent education programs, recovery coaches for substance-abusing parents,
programs that offer technical courses and internships, programs that provide free books, and countless prevention education programs ranging from teen pregnancy to criminal behavior.

4. *Schools bring communities together*

Schools play an important role in bringing together the community. Consider the role school sports or arts programs play. School sports often become points of pride for the community. School plays and activities populate the social calendar. Schools also play a role in introducing new ideas into the community, for example, by hosting maker faires, visiting speakers, or other similar gatherings.

5. *Schools address the unique and specific needs of all learners*

Many parents rely on teachers and counselors with advanced training to help navigate social and academic growth. This is particularly important for students with special needs, or those navigating learning in a second language. School counselors or teachers often have expertise assessing particular learning disabilities. Once assessed, teachers and counselors not only provide advice for treatment to parents, they also help parents navigate the complex systems for receiving governmental assistance.

Clearly, schools play a varied and rich role in the economic, social, and cultural growth not just of the students but of the broader community and society. Sadly these factors are rarely, if ever, taken into account when we evaluate schools.

**How should we measure the value of school?**

As things stand now, schools are typically evaluated by looking at aggregated academic results (usually end-of-the-year test scores) or easily countable measures related to academic results (such as graduation rates). It is not surprising that there is a whole industry devoted to informing parents and media on how to use these data (be it student score percentiles, AP test rates, ranking in U.S. News and World Reports) to evaluate schools. There are some pernicious side effects to this of course—from an inordinate emphasis on test-taking skills to outright fraud. In some areas, like teacher evaluation, the focus on academic measures can be even more single-minded. In the U.S., people measure the quality of teachers based primarily on their students’ academic gains from year to year (Close et al., 2020).

This is not to say that evaluation and accountability are not important. What is problematic, however, is an emphasis on just one aspect of schooling and even that is measured in a narrow, limited manner. Characteristic of this perspective is the following quote from Violane Faubert (2009), an economist with the European Commission and expert on school evaluation. He writes:
School evaluation serves two interlinked purposes, improvement and accountability. School improvement relates to access to education (equity) and education performance (quality and efficiency). School evaluation for improvement aims at closing achievement gaps between low-performing and high-performing schools, as well as to enhance the performance of all students. (p. 7)

Faubert, thus, frames the entire discussion of evaluation through a focus on education (through access, performance, and decreasing gaps). We suggest that it might be time to develop a new vision for measuring the value of schools.

What is missing from current accountability policies are all the different and complex roles that schools play. Few of these aspects are evaluated explicitly when we speak of evaluating schools or holding them accountable. There are two choices here. One is to decouple all these different things schools do and get other community organizations to take on some of these roles. In this case, the singular focus of schools would be learning and it would be somewhat appropriate to evaluate them on these current measures (We know there is also significant debate on how useful these current measures are, but we will sidestep that debate for now).

A second choice is to accept and acknowledge that academic learning is just one of many aspects of student development that schools are responsible for. It is important, hence, that schools should be held accountable in ways that extend beyond just short-term academic progress. A first step, one worth a considerable amount of effort and study, would be unpacking these different systems and creating evaluation mechanisms that are customized for each.

This global crisis may be a good time to start unpacking the value of school. So, we would like to list a few positives that may emerge from this global crisis.

1. A better understanding of what schools do

The first silver lining to this current crisis is that, we can no longer ignore the fact that schools do so much more than teach. As we have argued, schools do a lot for the communities they are in, and for the broader nation—not merely the delivery of disciplinary content. Or, as Richard Culatta says, “content, you know, that is just a really thin veneer of the overall education experience” (Culatta et al., 2020).

Since the crisis began and schools shut down across the world, parents (and other stakeholders) have begun to realize that schools play so many roles in society besides just teaching students academic skills. Articles about school bus routes being used to drop food off for students are part of the new narrative about schools. This more holistic picture of the purpose of schools play in society also suggests that we revisit the manner in which we evaluate the value of schools, since it changes the notion of what a school should be accountable for (and how this accountability is to be measured).
Such changes in accountability should bring visibility and transparency to the ignored, yet extremely valuable roles that schools play in society. As we noted previously, school personnel do so much beyond what they get credit for. Schools serve as the sites for so many broader social functions than just teaching children. Rethinking how we hold schools accountable, also makes visible other parts of school that demand recognition and appreciation.

2. **An opportunity to rethink accountability**

This current crisis may allow us to shake the dust off of a decades-long view of how to measure the value of schools. The problem with all the talk about “accountability” for the last decades was that they were based on business models (and actually some agricultural models) where leaders tried to measure sales (or the yield of crops; Aldrich, 2017).

Schools are responsible for so much more than learning. A good accountability program would measure the holistic impact of a school on a community. Schools in wealthy neighborhoods who handpick students from admission waiting lists have very different social roles than Title I schools that emphasize community enrichment programs such as after school childcare or free breakfast programs (To give credit, some evaluation programs do this).

Such a shift in school evaluation matters a great deal. It matters, because how we hold schools and teachers accountable nudges their actions. School administrators and teachers typically care deeply about their community of students and parents. But they also care about their job security. School ratings also drive important incentives like federal funding or enrollment rates. When testing plays such a key role, it nudges the behavior of administrators and teachers.

A better system design needs to carefully evaluate what a good school should do and how to nudge schools in those directions. When teachers eliminate interesting lessons in favor of “test practice,” then the system has failed. When principals refuse to enroll a student with a history of behavioral problems, the system has failed. When second year teachers with the best intentions quit after two years of poor student test scores, the system has failed.

Ultimately, we need to move away from valuing what we can measure to measure things that we truly value and that means, as a first step, recognizing all the different things that schools do.

**Lastly, a note**

Although we have not emphasized the teaching and learning aspects of school, this was a rhetorical move to highlight the other aspects of schooling that often get ignored.

In fact, we (as authors) must acknowledge that more than anything else, schools serve as places to inspire. In this, we are reminded of the words of the poet Yehuda Amichai:
I stood near the school building and looked in. This is the room where we sat and learned. The windows of a classroom always open to the future, but in our innocence we thought it was only landscape we were seeing from the window.

School is a place to stoke potential, even if that potential is not yet realized in school. Schools are, more than anything else, sites where students are first acquainted with deep, broad disciplinary ideas—in science and mathematics and in art and literature. Schools truly have the potential to change and build minds. But if that potential is not yet realized, then it will not show up on test scores. And if the measures we use to evaluate schools do not capture the richness of what they seek to do, we will have done a disservice to the learning, that we seek to realize, as well.

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