



Commentary on the Progress Report on the Futures of Education

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Congratulations

We would like to congratulate HE Sahle-Work Zewde, Chair of the Futures of Education Commission, its members and the headquarters team for the visionary work that they have achieved to date. Dr. Tandon and I have been working within UNESCO Education discourses for nearly 50 years. This is the most powerful and hopeful set of idea about education that has emerged. The timing is wonderful as we move into a build-back-better phase of the pandemic and come face to face with the climate crisis.

Reflections

The paragraph on the urgency for a new social contract with education is powerful. It articulates the limits of the current educational structures in the face of the wicked problems we are now facing. Broadly speaking the emerging report presents a strong and coherent case for and educational practice that supports 'commoning'. The focus on strengthening public education is critical as private education from early childhood to universities is mushrooming and operating in most jurisdictions outside of the regulatory capacities of governments. What is being called for in many ways will be seen as revolutionary in educational terms.

What is novel or deserving of attention

The urgency of our times expressed in many ways including, "We cannot continue to do more of the same". This willingness of the report to call for radical changes is fresh and powerful. With a UNESCO brand associated with this message, it will generate much needed reflections. Building education as a human right is consistent with the founding charter of UNESCO. We are aware that some countries are trying to remove concepts of human rights for global policy documents, but this must be resisted.

It is also novel to see reference to education as a process that will lead to better interaction with the 'more-than-human' forms of life. In our work we often refer to this as learning with the 'rest-of-nature', another phrase in English which underscores the fact that all life including humans are part of a common and organic living energy.

The section on ‘intellectual decolonization and epistemic diversity’ is also seen for the first time in a UNESCO document of this prominence.

More attention needed

Learning is the purpose of all education. Learning to become. ‘Education’ as a concept for most people refers to schooling. While the point is made in the report that you are referring to more than schooling, it would be important to look for places to emphasize that ‘education’ refers to structures, strategies, systems that support learning from birth to death. Learning is life-long and life-wide.

More emphasis is needed on the critical importance of recovering, revitalizing Indigenous knowledge systems as a necessary component in our earth’s survival. Some attention to ‘de-centering’ Eurocentric knowledge as the hegemonic knowledge system within global education would be critical. The narrow Eurocentric base of knowledge upon which our educational systems are built are one of the main reasons why we have failed to address ecological distress.

The report rightly draws attention to the inequities of our current educational system. We need to call for a ‘culture of caring’ in education rather than a competitive system. All forms of education from early childhood, adult, schooling, higher education as a human right need to focus on the success of each and every student.

In the section on higher education a remark on the inequities and distortions produced by competitive ranking systems is needed. Rankings show that the only excellent universities in the world are in North America, Europe, with a few in China and Japan. African universities will never have the resources to compete with Harvard or Oxford and yet some of them are amongst the most innovative universities meeting local needs in the world!

Anti-racism, anti-oppressive, inclusive approaches to learning need to be attended to before a commons of the public good will be realistic. If people feel their cultures, perspectives, are not represented democratically in society, the trends towards polarization in society will continue.

More wording on open science beyond open access will be desirable. We are sending you the brief in several languages that we have done on this topic so that you can pick some wording that might be inserted somewhere.

You might wish to provide some space for a discussion on the kinds of research that will support the emergence of a public good commons. Our Chair works on supporting the building capacity in the field of community-based participatory research with an emphasis on the co-construction of knowledge. This approach would call for the engagement in children, or students in the discussion how and what they want to learn. The intellectual contributions of learners in the design of learning systems is one of the most puzzling situations in the research world.

Finally do what you can to put some emphasis on the role of creativity and the arts in the learning in our lives. The arts have been proven to facilitate the connections of the cognitive and the affective, a critical element in building an approach to learning to live together. All children are born as musicians and artists. Schooling generally telling all but a small group of elite youngsters that they are not musicians, actors, artists or poets. Ceremony, Joy, celebration and fun are critical elements in learning for the public good.

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