



A few seconds of light: Radical futures and the role of education

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We are living through extraordinary and, for very many people, exceptionally hard times, yet I frequently find myself reflecting on how unexceptional everything seems. My morning commute is the same: the sky the same bleached grey, the same diffuse streetlight darting across car windshields as I wait for my bus. I sit at my desk, dock my laptop, and begin my work. I speak to colleagues. I drink coffee. I look out of the window. It's all so, well, normal. If it weren't for the ubiquitous presence of medical face masks and the unseasonably mild late-winter weather, you could be forgiven for supposing nothing at all has changed. But, of course, everything has.

The consequences of climate change are playing out around the world, erasing whole communities and threatening many others – half of the world's population is “highly vulnerable”, according to the latest report from the United Nations Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (Harvey 2022)¹ – while reshaping the global landscape, often irreversibly. Inequalities, stubbornly resistant to the half-sincere rhetoric of politicians, are widening. Democratic freedom is under attack, while, at the time of writing, war in Europe has killed thousands of people and displaced hundreds of thousands more (numbers likely to be substantially higher by the time you are reading this). And, as countries in the wealthy West prepare to return to something resembling normality in the wake of COVID-19 (some hastily, others in more measured fashion), the poorer parts of the world continue to struggle to get vaccines into arms and check the spread of the virus (Hassan et al. 2021).²

The banal, workaday rhythm of life in the Global North, its rituals and routines, its myriad distractions and diversions, maintains the illusion that forces that have never affected us never will, while those for whom these realities have long been a part of daily life can only shake their heads in astonished disbelief. For many in the

¹ Harvey, F. (2022). IPCC issues “bleakest warning yet” on impacts of climate breakdown. *The Guardian*, 28 February [online article]. Retrieved 3 March 2022 from <https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2022/feb/28/ipcc-issues-bleakest-warning-yet-impacts-climate-breakdown>

² Hassan, F., London, L., & Gonsalves, G. (2021). Unequal global vaccine coverage is at the heart of the current covid-19 crisis. *British Medical Journal*, 375, Art. 2074. <https://doi.org/10.1136/bmj.n3074>

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Global South, though, this will not be a surprise. For them, the unequal impacts of climate change and the pandemic are simply the latest episodes in the long history of Western exploitation, and the belief that the world is suddenly different, somehow more dangerous and less predictable, is just another expression of our privilege.

The pandemic may have highlighted our interdependence, at both individual and societal levels, and the critical value of social solidarity, but it has not been the great leveller some people thought, or hoped, it would be. Just the opposite. While, for many wealthy people, it has meant the mild inconvenience of spending more time at home, for less-advantaged populations it has meant daily exposure to the risk of infection, loss of income, and the necessity of weighing their own health – and that of those around them – against the need to put food on the table. At national level, we have seen wealthy countries hoard vaccines at the expense of countries in the Global South (Costello 2021),³ in some cases destroying millions of doses considered surplus to requirements (Schreiber 2021).⁴ Towards the end of 2021, the World Health Organization estimated that only 9 per cent of Africans had been fully vaccinated (Mwai 2021).⁵ And even in those places now preparing to “live with the virus” (Wolfe 2022),⁶ such living is likely to be a very different experience for transport drivers, and health and service workers, for example, than it will be for wealthier, more privileged people, who remain much better placed to protect themselves and their families from the risk of infection. While the pandemic has prompted countless acts of kindness and solidarity, it has also exposed the cruel inequalities perpetuated by our societies and by the economic principles on which they are organised.

The pandemic has taken a terrible toll – it has been both deadly and disorienting – but it is also an opportunity of sorts, as I have argued before. As we struggle to emerge from it and face the reality of a heating world increasingly characterised by climate disaster, it feels as though we have reached the exhausted fag end of the human experiment with exploitation of the natural world, of endless expansion on a finite planet. And with such endings comes the chance of a new beginning. The climate emergency, and the “closing window” now left for humanity to act (Harvey 2022), is a signal, one we can scarcely ignore any more, that we are in the death throes of the era of Western industrial and technological advance. Yet, for all of this, the hope of something radically better still amounts to not much more than a few thin straws in the wind.

³ Costello, A. (2021). The richest countries are vaccine hoarders: Try them in international court, *The Guardian*, 14 December [online article]. Retrieved 3 March 2022 from <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2021/dec/14/richest-countries-vaccine-hoarders-international-court-millions-have-died>

⁴ Schreiber, M. (2021). US throws out millions of doses of Covid vaccine as world goes wanting, *The Guardian*, 6 October [online article]. Retrieved 3 March 2022 from <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2021/oct/16/us-throws-out-millions-doses-covid-vaccine-world-shortages>

⁵ Mwai, P. (2021). Covid-19 vaccinations: African nations miss WHO target. *BBC Reality Check*, 31 December [online article]. Retrieved 3 March 2022 from <https://www.bbc.com/news/56100076>

⁶ Wolfe, J. (2022). Coronavirus briefing: How to “live with” covid. *New York Times*, 11 February [online article]. Retrieved 3 March 2022 from <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/02/11/briefing/coronavirus-how-to-live-with-the-virus.html>

There is a real danger, a likelihood, perhaps, that we will emerge from the pandemic less safe, less equal and less free; more ineluctably entwined with late capitalism's remorseless march to the edge of the climate precipice. Crises such as these not only illuminate the injustices of our world, they also shine a light into other possible worlds, they make everything around us bright and different futures thinkable, for a short while at least. The sky, however, is beginning to darken, the clouds massed on the horizon. What we do in these few, fleeting seconds of light will determine what kind of world we become; whether we continue on the same path into a future that is exceedingly dark, for all perhaps but the very rich and fortunate – and perhaps also for them (“no one is safe from the destructive effects of climate disruption”, the United Nations (UN) has pointedly warned; UN 2021a)⁷ – or we change course and build the better, fairer and more sustainable future we currently find so difficult to imagine. Nothing is preordained and we can still choose to tear up the script we have been handed. It is hard, but it is not impossible.

We are near the midpoint of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, perhaps the clearest, most tangible expression of the international community's willingness to change and do better. The UN puts the world behind schedule in achieving the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), noting how the pandemic has halted and even reversed progress in some areas, for example poverty reduction and education (Zhenmin 2021).⁸ We are two years into the UN's “decade of action” to accelerate progress towards achieving the SDGs – two years beset by what Secretary-General António Guterres has described as “the greatest cascade of crises in our lifetimes” (UN 2021b).⁹ The challenge posed by these circumstances is enormous. Transformational changes are required, there is no doubt about that, alongside a renewed commitment to solidarity and the critical moral mission of the SDGs.

The final report of UNESCO's Futures of Education initiative, *Reimagining our futures together: A new social contract for education* (UNESCO 2021),¹⁰ offers a new vision for education to support this shift, though it looks past the 2030 Agenda to 2050 and beyond. It is a timely and exciting attempt both to confront the new reality in which we find ourselves and to create new stories of who we are and our place in the world of which we are part. It is an invitation to a global conversation, rather than a plan or roadmap, and while it leaves many questions unanswered – and will, for that reason, leave many unsatisfied

⁷ UN (2021a). Climate change “a multiplier effect”, aggravating instability, conflict, terrorism, Secretary-General warns Security Council. *United Nations press release*, 9 December [online statement]. Retrieved 3 March 2022 from <https://www.un.org/press/en/2021/sgsm21074.doc.htm>

⁸ Zhenmin, L. (2021). View from the pandemic: stark realities, critical choices. In UN, *The Sustainable Development Goals Report 2021* (p. 3). New York, NY: United Nations, Department of Economic and Social Affairs. Retrieved 3 March 2022 from <https://unstats.un.org/sdgs/report/2021/view-from-the-pandemic/>

⁹ UN (2021b). Amid onslaught of crises, world must restore trust, solidarity to tackle COVID-19, climate change, Secretary-General says, opening annual General Assembly debate. *United Nations meetings coverage*, 21 September [webnews]. Retrieved 4 March 2022 from <https://www.un.org/press/en/2021/ga12364.doc.htm>

¹⁰ UNESCO (2021). *Reimagining our futures together: A new social contract for education*. Paris: UNESCO. Retrieved 3 March 2022 from <https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000379707.locale=en>

– its diagnosis of the problems we face is acute, and the framework it offers for transformation hopeful and coherent. The report warrants the careful attention of everyone in the education community and should be considered a contribution to wider debate about the kind of society we want. Indeed, the report’s potential will go unfulfilled without wider socio-political change, and it is a large part of the purpose of the report to realise education’s potential contribution to social transformation.

At the centre of the UNESCO report is the idea of a “new social contract for education” (ibid., p. iii), one that can “repair injustices while transforming the future” (ibid.). A social contract, as traditionally understood, is an implicit agreement among members of a society to cooperate to acquire social benefits, often involving sacrifice on behalf of individuals for the common good. The notion of sacrifice is important here because it indicates that the creation of any new social contract is unlikely to be an easy process: it implies that some interests will lose out, perhaps the most powerful and entrenched interests in society, and that some struggle is likely to be required to overcome them.

The new social contract for education – the “foundational and organizational principles that structure education systems” (ibid., p. 2) – the report argues, must “build on the broad principles that underpin human rights – inclusion and equity, cooperation and solidarity, as well as collective responsibility and interconnectedness” (ibid.), and be governed by a commitment to “assuring the right to quality education throughout life” and “strengthening education as a public endeavour and a common good” (ibid.). These foundational principles, in turn, “build on what education has allowed humanity to accomplish to this point and help to ensure that, as we move to 2050 and beyond, education empowers future generations to reimagine their futures and renew their worlds”(ibid.).

Education systems around the world, the report contends, “do not do enough to ensure just and peaceful societies, a healthy planet, and shared progress that benefits all”, and some of the difficulties we now face stem from this failure (ibid., p. 3), as well as from the “exclusions and oppressions” of the past (ibid., p. 20). The report urges a renewal of education, building on positive developments in, for example, technology and democratic participation, and reversing the emphasis on values of “individual success, national competition and economic development to the detriment of solidarity, understanding our interdependencies, and caring for each other and the planet” (ibid., p. 11; the choice of language alone represents an important change of emphasis). The report’s range of proposals (ibid., pp. 147–153) include calls for: pedagogies to be “transformed around the principles of cooperation and solidarity” (ibid., p. 147); curricula underpinned by human rights and democratic participation that emphasise ecological, intercultural and interdisciplinary learning and enhance learners’ abilities to access and contribute to the “knowledge commons” (ibid., p. 63); the further professionalisation of teaching as a collaborative, team-oriented endeavour in which teachers are recognised as knowledge producers and “key participants in forging a new social contract for education” (ibid., p. 151); the transformation of schools to promote just, equitable and sustainable futures and support ethics of cooperation and care; and the expansion of educational opportunities throughout life and in different cultural and social spaces, “going beyond deficit

conceptions of ‘skilling’ and ‘reskilling’ to embrace the transformative possibilities of education at all stages of life” (ibid., pp. 152–153).

There is much to welcome here, not least the report’s challenge to the market-driven (exam-ridden, high-stakes and punitive) logic that still characterises education policy in most places in the world and its reassertion of the link between education and social change. Its valuing of UNESCO’s humanistic appreciation of education is significant (and not to be taken for granted), as is its willingness to reframe this in terms sympathetic to the need for human beings to live more harmoniously with other life forms and with the planet, as well as among ourselves. The characterisation of education as an important public good, a collective endeavour aimed at the creation of new knowledge and new possible futures, is another welcome dimension, sorely missed in key education documents of recent decades, which have, by and large, aped the language of competition and private benefits, at the expense of serious discussion of citizenship, cooperation and culture. All of this is very positive and worthy of support and engagement. What remains to be seen is how this promise can be turned to action and offer an effective challenge to the norms and ways of organising education, and wider society, it aims to transcend.

The report seems to me to be hugely ambitious and potentially transformative. However, it is not clear how we can change education in such a radical way without addressing the context in which education takes place and challenging the powerful orthodoxies that sustain it. I understand that it is the role of education, as it is conceived of in the report, to create conditions for change, but is it possible for education to do this in any meaningful way when prevailing conditions are so inimical to it? How can we fulfil the promise of the report – its vision of a social contract for education based on cooperation and collective endeavour – in the context of national politics, private actors and other institutions that would prevent such things? Why would they support the idea of a social contract, let alone be party to one? What if they don’t? How do we engage with and change the policy process? Can we contract together, nonetheless, and, if so, on what basis, and with what prospect of success? Is it possible to build from the ground up? How do we start? The gap between ideas and practice seems wide. In particular, the report says little about the sacrifices required and the resistance any efforts towards implementing change are likely to meet. These are difficult questions, that perhaps lie beyond the scope of the report as it was conceived by its authors, but they highlight a serious concern, one that will, no doubt, be seriously debated in the all-important follow-up to the report. They are questions for us all.

This issue of the *International Review of Education – Journal of Lifelong Learning* engages with many of the issues raised in UNESCO’s Futures of Education report. One of its concerns, for example, was to champion the role of teachers and support their further professionalisation. The first article of this issue, “The mediating role of lecturer biographic factors on curriculum implementation in universities”, looks in detail at the role of teachers in higher education, a key site for potential transformation but also of potential resistance to change. Authors *Norman Rudhumbu* and *Elize du Plessis* conducted a mixed-methods study (involving a structured questionnaire and semi-structured interviews) of the impact of teachers’ biographies on curriculum implementation in higher education in Botswana.

Analysis of the data collected showed that lecturers' educational levels, age and past teaching experience were all significant influences on effective implementation of curricula in universities. This is an important finding, particularly in the context of highly regulated, performance-oriented education systems, which often neglect the role and agency of the teacher. As the Futures of Education report argues, teaching is a "collaborative profession", undergirded by a complex web of support, sites and partnerships, on which "possibilities for transformation rest" (ibid., p. 80).

The next article, "Informal learning experiences of Turkish sojourners in Europe: An exploration of their intercultural competence within the Erasmus student exchange scheme" shifts the focus to students. Authors *Esin Aksay Aksezer*, *Kutlay Yağmur* and *Fons J. R. van de Vijver* analyse the intercultural competence of students from Turkey who participated in the European Community Action Scheme for the Mobility of University Students (Erasmus). The aim of their study was to understand the dynamics of how students relate to their new destination and culture, and the role played by their awareness of their own culture, society and surroundings; the availability of social networks and support; the approach to learning (language, practical matters, relevant cultural information, etc.); and communication. Their findings confirm the importance of various layers of friendship networks (but not necessarily ethnic ties), as well as a balanced composition of home and host domain resources. In terms of identity issues, students were found to cling to universal identities, such as being an international/exchange student, and/or strategic personal ones, rather than religious, ethnic and national identities. Like the previous article, the study highlights the importance of informal learning and identity, as well as networks of support and shared experience.

The transformational potential of adult education is not limited to the student. It extends to the teacher who is often exposed not only to a different cohort of student but also to different teaching methods and values compared to more formal settings. Our next article, "Wider benefits of adult literacy teaching: A preliminary exploration of the impact of teaching literacy to adults on some facilitators" explores the impact the teaching of literacy to adults has on teachers and facilitators. On behalf of a team of 13 researchers, *Alan Rogers* and *Abiy Menkir Gizaw* report on a pilot research project conducted in Africa and Asia guided by the research question: "What impact did the experience of teaching literacy to adults have on your experience after the end of your teaching?" The small-scale enquiry was implemented in nine countries (Afghanistan, Botswana, Ethiopia, Kenya, Malawi, Nepal, Tanzania, Uganda, Zambia). Nineteen facilitators were interviewed, all of whom had ceased to teach (for various reasons, e.g. expiry of the adult literacy programme) at least three years prior to the studies. All of them felt that the experience of teaching literacy to adults had had a positive impact on their lives, and, in some cases, that it had been life-changing. Despite its limitations, acknowledged by the authors, the project demonstrates the importance and feasibility of such a study and encourages further surveys. The subject matter is certainly worthy of further, larger-scale exploration.

The fourth article in this issue, "Learning journey: Conceptualising 'change over time' as a dimension of workplace learning", focuses on a dimension of how individuals learn at work throughout their lives. Author *Adeline Yuen Sze Goh*'s particular interest lies in the "change over time". She proposes a conceptualisation of the

“learning journey” to explore the relational complexity of how individuals learn at different workplace settings across their working lives (a facet of workplace learning that is overlooked by existing theories, the author argues). Drawing, in particular, on the learning experiences of two in-service vocational college teachers enrolled in a one-year teacher preparation programme at a Brunei university in relation to their different roles at two points in time across different workplaces, Goh argues that individual learning is a complex interaction of individual positions, identities and agency towards learning. This complexity is relational and interrelated to the workplace learning culture, which demonstrates why learning is different for everyone in various workplaces and why, even for the same person, it can be different in the same workplace across different roles. This conceptualisation, the author argues, “highlights the need for lifelong learning policies to consider individual responsibility for learning and workplace affordances”, while also taking “the necessity of informal learning” into account.

The next article, “Factors predicting participation in higher education in Malaysia”, considers the learning journeys of higher education students. It was authored by *Intan H.M. Hashim, Seyed Reza Alvani, Suzanna Awang Bono, Norzarina Mohd Zaharim, Premalatha Karupiah, Nor Hafizah Selamat and Fauziah Md Taib*. They argue that studies on access to higher education in Malaysia tend to focus mainly on socio-demographic aspects and less on the personal and social variables preventing people from participating in higher education. Therefore, the authors attempt to identify the young people not participating in higher education in Malaysia and to investigate the personal and social factors predicting their lack of participation. They compared a group of young people not in higher education to a group of young people enrolled in higher education. Their study found a wide range of perceived factors hindering young people from participating in higher education, including previous negative experience, a lack of knowledge of higher education, personal interests outside of higher education, lack of support and other personal issues. School experience and family and community attitude to higher education were also reported as key factors. Many young people who did not participate in higher education had negative experiences of schooling, which gave them a negative impression of education more generally. The authors recommend that policy interventions to widen participation focus on three key variables: attitude towards education, knowledge of higher education, and perceived barriers.

The final article of the issue, “100 years of *Volkshochschule* in Germany – 50 years of DVV International: Signposts for local and global comparative perspectives on adult learning and education” applies a historical lens to adult education in Germany. Taking the recent centenary of the *Volkshochschulen*, the German adult education centres created in 1919, as a starting point, *Heribert Hinzen* and *Elisabeth Meilhammer* consider the growth of the movement as well as the significance of such anniversaries in fostering positive developments in modern-day education. The celebrations, they argue, generated “a collective cultural memory” that grounded the centres in the institutional foundations of a democratic society and advanced policy dialogue. At the same time, these celebrations were used within a marketing strategy to mobilise higher levels of support and participation and to demonstrate the importance of interventions for better policy, legislation and financing at local, national,

regional and global levels. The article highlights the importance of collective memory in education, particularly with regard to the founding aims and values of the adult education movement, as well as the need to recover some of its language and thinking in responding to the challenges we face today.

The latter insight is of particular relevance in the context of the Futures of Education report, the wider challenge of meeting the Sustainable Development Goals, and the upcoming Seventh International Conference on Adult Education (CONFINTEA VII) to be held in June 2022, and presents an opportunity to frame policy and practice in adult education for the next decade and beyond. The Futures of Education report represents a welcome revival of the vocabulary of solidarity, cooperation, community and citizenship, for some decades squeezed out of the discourse of education in favour of the language of markets, competition and human capital. We have an opportunity to rethink education, as the report proposes, from the standpoint of common purpose and collective endeavour. But the report, of course, is only a start, a stimulus for further dialogue. Realising its promise means seizing the moment represented by the “cascade of crises” through which we continue to struggle to navigate a path and radically change our course. Much, therefore, is being asked of the conversation the report’s authors hope to stimulate, and it remains to be seen how or whether it is possible to close the gap between the idealistic vision of the report and a reality in which education policy is shaped not by smart ideas and bold, expansive thinking but by power and political expediency.

The problem with change, for very many people, is not so much the problem of imagining how things could be different, it is the challenge of understanding what can be done in practical terms to make a difference and improve our lives and communities. This is the main challenge we face in engaging with the report and developing the new social contract for education it calls for and which we so clearly need. Of course, adult education and lifelong learning should have a key role to play in any such social contract or new settlement for education, and it should be considered in the wide, cooperative, civic spirit of the report. But adult education can also play an important role in supporting and legitimising the process of “broad social dialogue across multiple constituencies” (UNESCO 2021, p. 119) which, the report says, must underpin it.

I very much hope that CONFINTEA VII will be the start of a conversation about the role and relevance of adult education’s civic mission and how it can support radical change. I hope too that the Futures of Education report will be taken as a kind of invitation to civil society to support this exchange and facilitate engagement through education construed as an important site for democracy and civic action. Ideas alone will not give people hope. They have heard most of them before. They need, above all, the realistic prospect that through their engagement things will get better. Adult education should therefore not only be thought of as an important outcome of this process, but also as a way of facilitating it. As the report notes, “No trend is destiny” (*ibid.*, p. 3). We can go in a different direction if we choose. We must avoid quietism of the heart and intellect, however overwhelmed we feel, and put resources for co-construction in people’s hands, giving them the means to confront reality and create new stories for themselves. In these few seconds of light, we need to make sure we turn our wishful thinking into hopeful action. This is the moment.

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