



Education in an age of inequality

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As I write, the World Economic Forum (WEF) is concluding its annual meeting in the resort of Davos, Switzerland. The theme of this year's get-together was "cooperation in a fragmented world", with the WEF warning that "the twin triggers of the COVID-19 pandemic and the war in Ukraine" had "rattled an already brittle global system", leaving the world "at a critical inflection point" (WEF 2023a). With climate change, the cost-of-living crisis, food and energy insecurity, and rising inflation also high on the agenda, there was much for world and business leaders to discuss. Decisions will have been made at the meeting that will affect all of us, in one way or another, in the years to come. Deals will have been made, investments pledged, homage paid, and patronage given. It is doubtful though that these decisions will represent, or in any serious way contribute to, the radical change of course the world needs. As climate activist Greta Thunberg pointed out at a fringe event (Sky News 2023), the people who attend Davos include those who bear most responsibility for the climate crisis, notably the representatives and financial backers of the fossil fuel industry, the business model of which is, in the words of UN Secretary-General António Guterres, "inconsistent with human survival" (Kottasová 2023).

It is not clear what the harbinger of a viable, sustainable global future will look like, but it seems unlikely it will arrive and depart in a private jet, as hundreds of Davos delegates did (Greenpeace 2023). This is a cheapish shot, I admit, but it has some point, nonetheless. We can hardly be expected to take lessons on behaviour change and green transition from people who are themselves deaf to such exhortations. But we perhaps should not be surprised that some delegates do not apply the same rules to their own behaviour that they do to other people's. There is, after all, something oddly feudal about the event. State politicians drop everything to rub shoulders with the super-rich, the mega-investors, the oil and gas billionaires, the backroom authoritarians who own most of the world's wealth and like to keep their billions offshore. It is to such meetings that politicians' domestic pledges to reduce emissions and crackdown on tax avoidance go to die. It is a sort of elephants' graveyard for good intentions. In an age of extreme inequality, everything is for sale.

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Change equal to the challenges humanity faces demands not only better decisions but also a new approach to the way in which such decisions are made. It seems unlikely to be achieved simply by asking those who benefit the most from the ongoing destruction of the planet to be more considerate. Such change requires, and represents, a huge redistribution of power away from the super-rich to the people who pay the ultimate price for their excess. It means listening to the people at the bottom of the heap, the marginalised and excluded; those most vulnerable to the effects of climate change. It means restricting the power of the rich to distort our politics in their own interests. And it means, perhaps above all, a revival in democratic engagement and citizenship. Education is too important to be defined for us by people few of us have ever heard of, at a meeting mostly attended by wealthy white men. One of the lessons of history is that radical change does not ever really happen without grassroots activism and a groundswell of public pressure sufficient to galvanise political will.

The COVID-19 pandemic, and the massive social, economic, and educational upheaval it caused, gave people fleeting hope that large-scale social change was, finally, possible – that the crisis could act as a kind of “portal” (Roy 2020) to a transformed world, a chance to redraw the global map of privilege and punishment. Change, to some, seemed almost inevitable. How could we not make something better, having seen what we have seen, having sacrificed what we have sacrificed? We cannot just go back to normal, can we? Such optimism now looks fanciful. It could not survive long in the war-wracked, profit-driven economic reality of our century. Against a background of social and economic regression, politics remains a crude cabaret of ruthless pragmatism and childish sentimentality, a game everyone plays but few get to win. Yet all the while the climate clock is ticking. Any action now will inevitably be too late. It is more a matter of how much we can save, if anything. But the invitation to rethink everything is still there. The news gives us nightly reminders of our fragility and brokenness. There is perhaps some hope to be had in the understanding that we must change to survive. But that is a cold kind of comfort, given where we are.

The International Commission on the Futures of Education was launched before the COVID-19 pandemic, and its main report (ICFE 2021) was published as parts of the world began to emerge from the prolonged crisis that resulted from it. It spoke to the optimism felt by some as they surfaced from two years of lockdown and disruption. But it also provoked rebuke from those who saw the prospects for a “new social contract for education” aimed at strengthening the common good and fostering shared social purpose as rather remote given how decades of neoliberal politicking had placed more and more power and wealth in the hands of a few, while reshaping democracy and education to ensure its further consolidation (Carney 2022; Eلفت and Morris 2022). When the WEF reimagined the learning experience with a perspective on the future, in a paper discussed at this year’s meeting, its emphasis was not on solidarity or justice or transformation but on growth, productivity, economic returns, and skills development (WEF 2022). It is important to appreciate how marginal the perspective advanced in the Futures of Education report (ICFE 2021) is and how difficult it will be to persuade those who think otherwise to change

course. Decades of neoliberal system-rigging have seen the ideological marginalisation of ideas such as solidarity, cooperation, and inclusion. And nothing, really, has changed.

While the big beasts of Davos discuss “future-proofing” the economy and “preparing people” for the “fourth industrial revolution” and the economies of the future (WEF 2023b), workers around the world face an uncertain future, with the International Labour Organization warning that poverty reduction has stalled while more people can expect to be forced into low-quality, insecure, and poorly paid jobs because of the economic slowdown (Makortoff 2023). In fact, since the COVID-19 pandemic struck, inequality has surged, with billionaire fortunes increasing by USD 2.7 billion a day. The richest 1 per cent has grabbed nearly two-thirds of the USD 42 trillion of new wealth created since 2020, almost twice as much money as the bottom 99 per cent of the world’s population, according to Oxfam (Oxfam International 2023). At the same time, 1.7 billion workers now live in countries where inflation is outpacing wages (ibid.). Of course, income is only one aspect of poverty. Many of those experiencing wage or food poverty also lack access to social goods such as health care and education. Even in wealthier countries, access to these goods is limited for the poor. In such circumstances, plans to promote workers’ adaptability and resilience to change may sound more like a threat than a promise.

Extreme inequality restricts opportunity, undermines democracy, and reduces civic trust and participation. While education could challenge this, very often it helps perpetuate it, through, for example, a diminished curriculum that fails to provide people even with the basic skills they need to do a job, an unequal distribution of resources (e.g. between private and public schools), a punitive approach to testing and accountability, and the marginalisation of subjects linked to critical thinking and citizenship. This is not surprising, since it is designed from the same template that has seen billionaires massively enhance their fortunes, profiting from the privatisation of the commons while minimising their tax payments and obligations. Power shapes education, not the other way around. Thus, inclusion in the labour market has become a proxy for every other kind of inclusion. Education policy is framed as a means of achieving economic ends. Lifelong learning is reduced to adaptability in the workplace. This is what you end up with if you calculate the value of education in terms of potential increases in GDP. It is not what a fair, inclusive, and participatory education system would look like, and it is not an adequate response to the challenges we now face. The need to reimagine education as a tool of intellectual and social emancipation and renewal is compelling and, perhaps, obvious. But there is no safe or secure passage to it, and no roadmap of any sort if we do not acknowledge the power wealthy elites exercise over how education is currently imagined. While the Futures of Education report (ICFE 2021) does not answer these questions, it has made them, in a sense, unavoidable.

The articles in this issue all consider education in the context of the broader constellation of factors capable of improving people’s lives and making their communities better places in which to live. They demonstrate, among other things, the wider benefits of education, which go well beyond the acquisition and development of skills for work.

The first article reflects on the shift to online teaching and learning during the pandemic. “A systematic review of K–12 education responses to emergency remote teaching during the COVID-19 pandemic”, written by *Ahmed Khalaf Al Mazrooei, Samah Hatem Almaki, Mnyero Gunda, Alhamzah Alnoor and Saif Manji Sulaiman*, evaluates empirical evidence from peer-reviewed literature on the implementation of emergency remote teaching (ERT) precipitated by the COVID-19 pandemic. The authors selected 51 studies for thematic and content analysis, developing a taxonomy which they used to conduct an analysis and critical review, highlighting challenges and gaps in the literature on ERT in K–12 education settings. The article highlights some of the innovative strategies used to overcome obstacles to technological readiness and to support online learning adaptation and teachers’ and students’ physical and mental health during the pandemic. The authors argue that policymakers and practitioners need to better understand the obstacles and opportunities documented in published work in order to ensure education systems are prepared for future ERT demands.

The second article, by *Arliene Stephanie Menezes Pereira and Rosie Marie Nascimento de Medeiros*, focuses on the transmission of Indigenous knowledge and its importance to cultural identity and resistance. In “Ethnicity and education: How Indigenous knowledge and cultural identity are passed on through the Torém ritual of the Tremembé people”, they consider an Indigenous group on the west coast of the Brazilian state of Ceará. Despite being labelled as “mixed-blood”, and thus denied their Indigenous identity, this Amerindian group has achieved social notoriety by organising themselves around their sacred ancestral ritual, the Torém. This slow, circular mimetic dance, in which participants sing, in Amerindian and Portuguese, and drink *mocororó*, a hallucinogenic drink made from fermented cashew nuts, evokes the ancestors of the Tremembé. The ritual transmits Indigenous identity knowledge concerning language preservation, self-designation and identity affirmation. The authors examine the practice of the ritual at Maria Venâncio Differentiated Indigenous School, on Almofala beach, in the municipality of Itarema. Drawing on their observation of teaching sessions and the oral reports of Indigenous people, the authors consider the centrality of the Torém to the school curriculum and teaching, its symbolic relationship to the struggles of the Tremembé people, and the challenge of keeping young people engaged in a form of education that captures a shared tradition and brings it to life.

“Intégration des écrits de métier en formation professionnelle du secondaire supérieur”, the third article of this issue, written by *Isabelle Rioux and Rachel Bêlisle*, considers the integration of trade-related writing in upper secondary vocational training. The authors present a critical review of academic literature on the integration of writing into technical and vocational education and training (TVET) programmes attended by adults who do not have a diploma or who have difficulties with reading or writing. One finding of the review is the virtual absence of problematisation of the realities of certain TVET sub-groups, including non-qualified adults and others who may make little use of the written word. Another is that practices and strategies for teaching and learning writing can be located on an integrated literacy continuum, which makes it possible to situate literacy practices in relation to linguistic or pragmatic characteristics. The range of such practices and strategies

is diverse and may promote a use of writing that is quite different from the kind applied in the workplace. The article calls for future work on vocational writing to include modes of use in work situations and to take into account the pragmatic dispositions of students.

The next item, a research note entitled “A randomised evaluation of a financial literacy programme for upper secondary school students in Uruguay”, written by *Fernando Borraz, Ana Caro, Maira Caño-Guiral* and *María José Roa*, evaluates the impact of *BCUeduca*, an economic and financial education programme initiated by the Central Bank of Uruguay in 2012. The programme aims to contribute to an informed citizenry by offering workshops designed for teachers and students, journalists, families and workers, trade union leaders, retired people, female prisoners and personnel from different state agencies, as well as people related to non-profit institutions. Topics include how to manage the family budget, understanding the financial system and understanding monetary policy. The research note focuses on *BCUeduca*’s financial education programme for upper secondary school students. Based on an innovative playful and reflective approach involving simulation and role-play in a workshop format, this programme aims to provide information and impart knowledge about inflation and financial systems, thus facilitating participants’ responsible, conscious and competent decision-making in everyday life. The authors’ findings reveal a positive and significant impact on student’s financial knowledge.

The final item, a research note written by *D. Brent Edwards Jr., Taeko Okitsu* and *Peggy Mwanza* entitled “Low-fee private schools for early childhood care and education? Insights from Zambia in the context of economic globalisation”, considers the trend of “low-fee private schools” (LFPSs) for the poor, which have gained attention in low- and middle-income countries where governmental funding is insufficient to provide education for all. While some research exists in the context of primary and, to some extent, secondary education, there is little at the level of early childhood care and education (ECCE). The note seeks to redress this, while contributing, more generally, to literature on the operation of LFPSs. Drawing on a study of LFPSs in Lusaka, Zambia, its specific goal is to share insights into the complexities, difficulties and inequities that intersect with – and stem from – the provision of ECCE through LFPSs, above all in the context of insufficient public funding, low governmental capacity, and export-oriented economic globalisation. While parents often make significant sacrifices to send their children to such schools, the authors identify issues to do with quality, institutional stability and teachers’ poor pay and conditions. They speculate that governments may be happy to allow LFPSs to operate despite quality concerns “because of a lack of financial resources to provide public ECCE”. LFPSs often set up in impoverished areas where there are few state schools.

The growth in private schools relates in part to the perceived quality and lack of investment in public schools, as well as to their availability. The research note demonstrates the struggle poorer parents often have in finding decent education for their children. As the authors note, many face a choice between education and basic needs. It is worth remembering, amidst all the smart talk about the transformational power of educational technology and innovation, that six out of every 10 children in the world are unable to read by age 10, while 244 million children and youth are out

of school, and 771 million adults are illiterate (UNESCO 2023). This represents an astonishing but entirely routine loss of human potential. This is a crisis, a violation of basic rights, there is no doubt about it, but it is also something the richer parts of the world are prepared to tolerate or ignore. People like me are fond of saying that education can lift people out of poverty, and it may well be true, but the question remains who will pay for it in a world characterised by extreme inequality, offshore wealth, and tax avoidance on an industrial scale. While the transformative potential of education is a popular topic at events such as Davos, tax avoidance, unsurprisingly, is not. The truth though is that we will make little progress on education without a massive redistribution of power, wealth, and opportunity. On that front, the billionaires of Davos have little to say.

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