FEATURE

An educational framework for a post-capitalist world? A review of the 2021 report from UNESCO's International Commission of the Futures of Education

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The title of this recent report from UNESCO published in 2021 is, *Reimagining our futures together: A new social contract for education* (UNESCO, 2021). The report is the third of its kind commissioned by UNESCO, since its foundation in November 1945. The first of these was the Faure Commission report in 1972, Learning to Be: The World of Education Today and Tomorrow (UNESCO, 1972) followed by the Delour's report in 1996, titled Learning: The Treasure Within (UNESCO, 1996). This most recent report has been prepared by the International Commission on the Futures of Education, led by Her Excellency Madame Sahle-Work Zewde, President of the Federal democratic Republic of Ethiopia. The consultation process took place over a two-year period, involving over one million participants, and also involved the commissioning of a series of working papers. The report goes beyond the timescale of the 2016 report, Education 2030: Incheon Declaration and Framework for Action for the implementation of Sustainable Development Goal 4: Ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all (UNESCO, 2016) and looks to 2050 with the aim of being able to anticipate and shape both nearer and more distant futures.

This latest report ends with a call to begin a process of dialogue and co-construction, based on the vision set out in some detail, over its 160-plus pages. In this article, I have taken the step of reimagining this new social contract for education taking place within a post-capitalist context, as it is difficult to picture the inclusive, cooperative and compassionate future imagined, as being able to exist within the current dominant economic, and social paradigm.

> "Education systems have wrongly instilled a belief that short-term prerogatives and comforts are more important than longer-term sustainability. They have emphasised 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." (UNESCO, 2021 p.11)

The report has been compiled by the International Commission of the Futures of Education, with the aim of inviting governments, institutions, organisations and citizens around the world to, *'forge a new social contract for education that will help us build peaceful, just and sustainable futures together and for all'* (p.12).

While giving an overview of the structure and content of the report I will highlight what I argue is absent from its narrative. I will then explain the way in which the report offers a hugely important context for the starting point of the national conversation on education in Scotland, called for in Putting Learners

at the Centre: Towards a Future Vision for Scottish Education report (Scottish Government, 2022) and subsequently launched by Scottish Government on the 20th September 2022. Putting Learners at the Centre, which was written in response to the OECD report, Scotland's Education: Into the future (OECD, 2021) and contains the findings of a consultation process led by Professor Ken Muir offers a number of recommendations, however neither it nor the OECD report references this UNESCO report.

Report structure and content

The main body of the report is broken into three parts: Part One – *Between past promises and uncertain futures*. Part Two – *Renewing Education*. Part Three – *Catalysing a new social contract for education*. It closes with a final section titled *Epilogue and continuation: Building futures of education together*. The report also contains a very useful Executive Summary and an Introduction which helps to contextualise the content which follows.

The foundational principles of the report are stated as, '*Assuring the right to quality education throughout life, and strengthening education as a public endeavour and a common good.'* (p.7)

The Executive summary draws out five key proposals, these are.

- Pedagogy should be organised around the principles of cooperation, collaboration and solidarity.
- Curricula should emphasise ecological, intercultural and interdisciplinary learning that supports students to access, and produce knowledge, while also developing their capacity to critique and apply it.
- Teaching should be further professionalised as a collaborative endeavour, where teachers are recognised for their work as knowledge producers, and key figures in educational and social transformation.
- Schools should be protected educational sites because of the inclusion, equity, and individual and collective well-being they support – and also reimagined to better promote the transformation of the world towards more just, equitable and sustainable futures.
- We should enjoy and expand the educational opportunities that take place throughout life and in different cultural and social spaces.

The report proposes answers to the questions:

What should we continue doing? What should we abandon? What needs to be creatively reimagined?

It states that, *'All schools, regardless of who organises them, should educate to advance human rights, value diversity and counter discrimination.'* (p.13). In addition, it calls for, *"… education that allows us to go beyond the space we inhabit and that accompanies us into the unknown."* (p.52)

Part one - between past promises and uncertain futures

This section contains two chapters; Chapter One -*Towards more equitable futures*, and Chapter Two – *Disruptions and emerging transformations*. These chapters follow on from points raised in the introduction, with a wide-ranging discussion of key issues which are identified as contributing to the

inequity of access to education, and the exclusion of many from its benefits. Persistent poverty, disability, and gender bias are shown to have huge impacts on whether, and until what age, young people are able to access education. It argues that economic globalisation increasingly decides what and how students should learn.

Chapter Two lays out the urgent need for action on environmental sustainability and emphasises the injustice of those countries and people that have contributed least to the problem of climate breakdown and biodiversity loss, that are now suffering the most. This chapter includes a critical review of the extent to which 'democratic backsliding', and 'growing polarization', between ideological perspectives, threaten the potential progressive realisation of human rights.

In discussion around the connection between learning and work there are several crucial issues raised, pointing out that, 'education cannot make up for inadequacies in other policy domains that have caused – and continue to cause – declining job quality as well as widespread unemployment.' (p.42).

The points raised in this paragraph demand urgent consideration,

> "One of the indicators of the vast gender disparities that still exist is the perpetuation of the occupational segregation between men and women. Overall, what is formally considered 'work' and what is measured as 'productivity', makes a great deal of essential labour invisible. This is work that is vital to society but that has often been feminised and typically takes place in the home. Examples include caregiving, child-rearing, caring for the sick, cleaning, cooking, and providing physical and emotional support to others. When this work is formalised, these professions are often lower-paid and have lower status." (p.41)

When discussing the uncertain future of work, much ground is covered, including the potential and current relationship with technology and artificial intelligence. The authors note the tendency for those at the core of much tech development to often be male and drawn from un-diverse cultural backgrounds. What is left unsaid throughout the report, despite its frequent calls for a future based on values of peace and justice, is the huge impact of the military industrial complex (MIC). The role of arms manufacturers, private sector security firms and the military itself in creating and sustaining international tensions, is not discussed, neither is the appalling environmental and social cost of such activities (Ní Bhriain, 2022). This is a significant omission.

Recent global trends away from participatory democracy where human rights are respected, to more authoritarian and populist forms of government, are discussed. *'Rights – civic, social, human, environmental – are being displaced or curtailed by authoritarian governments that rule by mobilising fears, prejudices and discrimination.'* (p.39). It calls for the building of student's capacities for active citizenship and democratic participation.

Chapter two closes with a discussion of the potential of a world where 'work' becomes less central to people's lives, and asks how the productive and creative impulses of human beings might be best channelled in other socially and personally useful directions? The authors offer this helpful reflection, *'In future, how and what we value may change in ways that are very different from anything that humanity has known in our subsistence, agricultural, industrial and post-industrial economies.'* (p.45).

This willingness to engage with the unknown and to some extend unknowable, is in my view, one of the reports major strengths.

Part two – renewing education

This section begins with a chapter titled, *Pedagogies of cooperation and solidarity*. It calls for the classic pedagogical triangle of students, teachers and knowledge to be envisioned within the wider world and allow us to unlearn human exceptionalism and possessive individualism. For me this raises an important reflective question as to whether in education we are educating people for the world we have, or the world we need?

My experience has been that the focus of educators in Scotland especially at a secondary school level is to meet the targets of 'positive destinations', usually narrowly defined as, employment, apprenticeships, or further and higher education. The idea of imagining positive destinations that may not align with these proscribed outcomes, or indeed depending on the nature of the employment, the fact that for many young people their experience of employment may not in any way be 'positive' is, I would argue, currently given insufficient thought by policy makers.

Parents and carers from economically privileged backgrounds can offer their children the financial support to travel, or simply to support them economically, while they pursue diverse interests such as the media and the arts or setting up a small business. This is one of the reasons we see such a lack of class and cultural diversity in these sectors. It can also be reasonably argued that the ongoing mental health crisis amongst young people could be in part due to the relentless nature of having to perform in the competitive environments of work and formal study. There is no rational economic imperative that prohibits society from offering financial support to all young people to enjoy space to be rather than do. Ideas such as the creation of a 'Time out fund' that allows a break for those between the ages of 18 and 21 to engage in creative, and regenerative activities, allowing them time to mature and make more informed choices on their steps into adulthood, are an example of 'out of the box' thinking that might positively address our current mental health crisis among young people. The current capitalist paradigm inhibits even the consideration of such an approach, as it sees young people predominately as economic units of consumption and cheap labour. Our current system burdens young people with debt for wishing to learn, or simply to be able to survive in the neoliberal marketplace. Is this the only futures we can imagine for current and future generations?

This report invites the reader to question the most fundamental assumptions that are often left unproblematised by the increasingly bureaucratic and managerialist processes imposed on the fields of education and social care. It calls for pedagogies of solidarity that, *'…recognise and redress the systemic exclusions and erasures imposed by racism, sexism, colonialism and authoritarian regimes around the world.' (p.9).* As a community educator I recognise the widespread and hegemonic nature of neoliberal capitalism, and its pivotal role in driving inequalities in wealth and power, and I am also deeply concerned by the corrosive impact of neoliberal capitalism on the practice and development of democracy (Brown, 2019). The centrality of capitalisms fetishism of the overriding priority of increased shareholder value, has accelerated the destruction of the natural world. Therefore I feel the omission

of naming capitalism alongside the ills of racism, sexism, colonialism and authoritarianism, is a significant oversight.

Perhaps the authors are inferring the need for the development of such a critical perspective on all systemic forms of oppression in these lines, *'Education that allows young people to understand and link their pasts, presents and futures, analyse the inequalities that shape their experiences, stand up to exclusion and marginalisation, is one of the best preparations for unknown futures.'* (p.53).

The chapter goes on to offer a commentary relating to pedagogical journeys at every age and stage. It suggests, 'To best support children to live well in future worlds, we must support early childhood pedagogies orientated towards critique, challenge and the creation of new possibilities.' (p.57). I am suggesting that this call for the 'creation of new possibilities' opens the 'Overton window', the space in which ideas enter into mainstream public discourse, sufficiently to usher the discussion of 'post-capitalist' futures, into the discussion of future education policies.

Chapter Three ends with a summary of four principles for dialogue and action. ***Interconnectedness and interdependencies should frame pedagogy***; to promote understanding of how students' actions affect others and how others' actions affect them, classrooms and schools should bring students in to contact with others who are different from them.

Cooperation and collaboration must be taught and practised in appropriate ways at different levels and stages. Developing the capacity of individuals to work together to transform themselves and the world is a key role for education and can and should happen at every age and stage.

Solidarity, compassion, ethics, and empathy should be ingrained in how we learn. Teaching should focus on unlearning bias, prejudice, and divisiveness. Empathy – the ability to attend to others and feel with them – is essential for building pedagogies of solidarity.

Finally, ***Assessment should be aligned to these aims and be meaningful for student growth and learning.*** The authors point out that a great deal of important learning cannot be easily measured or counted and that the importance of competitive, high-stakes standardised assessments must be reduced.

Chapter 4 deals with '*Curricula and the evolving knowledge commons'*. It begins by making the point that, *'Educators should approach the acquisition of knowledge by simultaneously asking: what should be learned, and what should be unlearned? This is a particularly important question at this critical juncture in which the mainstream development and economic growth paradigm needs to be rethought in the light of the ecological crisis.'* (p.64). This chapter contains a huge amount of critical discussion calling for the building of epistemic, cognitive and reparative justice and demanding that special emphasis in curricula development be given to climate change education. *'Effective and relevant climate change education is gender responsive, takes an intersectional approach to social and economic factors across time and geography, and fosters critical thinking and active civic engagement.'* Going on to say, '*Climate change education should empower students to consider just and sustainable alternatives and to take action in their local communities, and in solidarity, beyond.'* (p.66).

What type of action students should take is left largely undefined. Global responses to movements, such as 'Fridays for the Future', vary significantly and the recent crackdown on the right to protest and continued anti-trade union legislation go against the idea of an empowered citizenship. To what extent the international labour movement and direct-action policies of organisations such as Greenpeace and Extinction Rebellion are discussed in school settings is unclear. While movements such as Teach the Future, Parents for the Future, and Black Lives Matter, are demanding the myth of political neutrality in educational settings is challenged, there is still a normative culture in educational settings in the UK that allows indoctrination into the values of free market capitalism to be seen as common sense and discussion of alternative paradigms to be considered as dangerously left wing and radical. Teachers, parents, carers and civic society need to bring this issue to the fore, as it is a key context for the 'culture wars' being waged by the far right in the UK and across the world. This report clearly understands the role of education and educators is to promote human rights, and wider social and ecological justice. This view runs contrary to the views of many on the right wing of the political spectrum. As Archbishop Desmond Tutu noted, "If you are neutral in situations of injustice, you have chosen the side of the oppressor."

Chapter four concludes with a set of four principles and actions. These being that, *Curricula should enhance learners' abilities to access and contribute to the knowledge commons. The ecological crisis requires curricula that fundamentally reorient the place of humans in the world. The spread of misinformation must be countered through scientific, digital and humanistic literacies. Human rights and democratic participation should be key building blocks for learning that transforms people and the world.*

Chapter Five and Six deal with *The Transformative Work of Teachers* and *Safeguarding and Transforming schools*, while Chapter Seven deals with *Education across different times and spaces.* As a community educator although wholeheartedly endorsing the important issues discussed in Chapters Five and Six, it is the subject matter of Chapter Seven which intrigued me most. The discussion of the role of government and states in providing education, begins with the statement that there is a global consensus that education is a fundamental enabling human right. This claim while certainly being aspirational, seems open to challenge. There are many cultural contexts in which education is used to withhold knowledge and to socialise people of all ages into 'officially sanctioned' modes of thought and behaviour. To claim a global consensus that education is a fundamental enabling right in a world where students are jailed for the use of social media, as has been the recent case of Salma al-Shehab in Saudi Arabia (Kirchgaessner, 2022); where freedom of speech is harshly mitigated against which is the case across many countries including, China, Russia, Myanmar and many others; where religious fundamentalists ban reading materials and discussion of crucial subjects such as reproductive and LGBTQi+ rights, as in the United States, Iran, and many of the 69 countries where it is still illegal to be gay, it is clear there is still some distance to travel in terms of the recognition of human rights as a fundamental value, let alone what a form of education that promotes them might look like. The increase in electoral support of right-wing parties in Hungary, Poland, Italy, France, Spain and many others, must sound alarm bells for anyone thinking that the battle for the progressive realisation

of human rights has been won. In my view the report would be stronger if it called out this issue more explicitly.

While perhaps over stating the level of global consensual understanding of the role of education, the chapter goes on to raise crucial issues related to the ownership of digital infrastructures and their growing importance in relation to the future of education.

> "It is necessary to ensure that key decisions about digital technologies as they relate to education and knowledge are made in the public sphere and guided by the principle of education as a public and a common good. This implies addressing the private control of digital infrastructures and defending against the anti-democratic capture and enclosure of the digital knowledge commons that increasingly figure as part of education's ecosystems." (p.110)

In keeping with the holistic vision and wide-ranging scope of the issues raised in the report chapter seven also reinforces the need for, *'Learning with the Living Planet'* (p.112), highlighting the value of indigenous knowledge and arguing for the metaphor of 'rewilding' education as helpful in the idea of building education in new ways. The chapter closes with a reminder of the strong emancipatory tradition of adult learning, commenting that this has been eroded in recent years by an excessive focus on the vocational and skills dimensions of lifelong learning. Here I was disappointed there was no mention of the fascinating work on life deep learning by Belanger (Belanger, 2015) which I believe offers an important dimension when considering ways in which processes and practices of learning can be enhanced.

As a community educator in Scotland the huge imbalance in resources and policy focus between mainstream formal education and community education has been exacerbated by a decade of austerity and cuts to public services. The transformative potential of the practices of youth work, adult learning and community development have in some cases been sacrificed in an attempt to make their practice align with mainstream educations focus on preparation for the workplace. The opportunity offered by UNESCO's report is to fundamentally rethink the nature, purpose and practice relating to education and in this area, community education practitioners have a huge amount to offer.

Part Three of the report deals with, *'catalysing a new social contract for education'*. It begins with a statement which I think usefully captures the essence of why this work demands a significantly higher level of engagement from educators in Scotland than is currently the case: ***'Stepping up to the multiple overlapping crises that threaten the survival of humanity, and the living planet necessitates a radical change of course. We must urgently build together a new social contract for education – inspired by principles of social, epistemic, economic and environmental justice – that can help transform the future.'*** (p.119). I do not believe that currently our approach to the transformation of educational practice and policy in Scotland and indeed the wider UK recognises and engages with the need for a radical change of course in thinking and action. We seem trapped in a hamster wheel of reform running faster and faster yet making no progress in matters of substance.

Chapter eight deals with calls for research and innovation while chapter nine deals with the need for global solidarity and international cooperation as a response to an increasingly precarious world order.

The discussion of the financing of education in areas of greatest need I would argue is one of the weakest elements of the report. It fails to highlight the role of tax avoidance and fraud committed by some multinational companies that robs many countries of financial resources to invest in education and public health (Tax Justice Network, 2021). This is where I argue the need to be able and willing to imagine a post-capitalist world where resources are more effectively utilised and redistributed becomes central to notions of the future of education.

In Scotland as in many other countries across the world there exists a 'ideological monoculture', one which fails to offer an opportunity for learners to engage with epistemological and ontological positions which do not centre the capitalist economic and social model. Increasingly the epistemological and ontological capitalist hegemony is being challenged by those most impacted by the huge levels of economic inequality (Oxfam, 2022). If as educators, we are unable or unwilling to educate ourselves in the economic and ecological realities of the costs of capitalism, then we will be unable to move forward, let alone transform our approaches to education towards living in harmony with each other and the planet. I believe this report is an invaluable catalyst for the type of transformative debate needed in Scotland and beyond, regarding not only the future of education but the future of life as we know it. The report concludes with a call for precisely such a global debate, however as of yet, I have been unable to identify an appetite for such engagement with practitioners and policy makers here. I hope this review might go some way to changing this situation.

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