



# The Long Shadow Between the Vision and the Reality

## A Review of UNESCO's Report *Reimagining our futures together: a new social contract for education*

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### Abstract

In 2021 UNESCO published a major new report outlining its vision for education titled *Reimagining our futures together: a new social contract for education*. In the context of UNESCO's Futures of Education Initiative, the report was produced by an international Commission chaired by the President of Ethiopia, Sahle-Work Zewde. We review the report with reference to the two major Reports on the future of education previously published by UNESCO and with regard to its potential impact on education. While welcoming the report's promissory narrative for the future, which provides a refreshing alternative to the neoliberal ideology which has dominated discussions of education policy globally for many decades, we argue that the report lacks a political stance and a critical analysis of power which undermines its ability to challenge the *status quo*.

**Key words:** UNESCO, education, *Futures of Education Report*, *Faure Report*, *Delors Report*, humanism, social contract

UNESCO's Report *Reimagining our futures together: a new social contract for education*<sup>1</sup>, launched in November 2021 in the context of UNESCO's *Futures of Education* initiative, represents the organisation's third major report on the future of education, following the 1972 *Learning to Be* (also known as the *Faure Report*)<sup>2</sup> and the 1996 *Learning: The Treasure Within* (also known as the *Delors Report*)<sup>3</sup>. The report maintains the strong humanistic orientation long associated with UNESCO's visions of education. Overall we interpret the report as a challenge to both the powerful

1 International Commission on the Futures of Education, *Reimagining our futures together: a new social contract for education*, UNESCO, Paris 2021.

2 E. Faure et al., *Learning to be: the world of education today and tomorrow*, UNESCO, Paris 1972.

3 J. Delors et al., *Learning: the treasure within; Report to UNESCO of the International Commission on Education for the Twenty-first Century*, UNESCO, Paris 1996.

impact of the tenets of neoliberalism on education and of a range of factors that have accelerated over the last three decades, including climate change, sustainability, technological change, the rise of populist nationalisms and health pandemics. We will comment on what we consider to be the key messages of the report by situating them in the context of its two precursor reports, with a focus on the “social contract”. We will argue that the report lacks a political stance and a critical analysis of power which undermines its ability to challenge the *status quo*.

### Relating the *Futures of Education Report* to the *Faure Report* and the *Delors Report*

There are continuities and dissimilarities between the new report (hereafter the *Futures of Education Report*) and the two previous reports. An obvious difference is that its key message is no longer on lifelong learning: the report mentions lifelong learning several times, but it does not engage substantially with the concept as both the *Faure Report* and *Delors Report* did, which postulated lifelong learning as the global educational master concept that stood for a democratization of society<sup>4</sup>. Despite this difference, the *Futures of Education Report* also connects with the previous reports insofar as it designs an ideal vision of a just society. The “social contract”, one of its key ideas, was also a central concept which influenced the *Faure Report*. Another of its key ideas, the “global common good”, placing the emphasis on the collective, togetherness, and our interdependencies on one another, connects with the *Delors Report*, which promoted the importance of “learning to live together”.

It also echoes the previous reports by re-claiming education as a right and stressing the importance of humanism. However, it is a different form of humanism. Both the *Faure Report* and *Delors Report* were situated in UNESCO’s tradition of “scientific humanism” in that they were indebted to rationalism and progress, universal values, and a concept of human beings as masters of their own destiny<sup>5</sup>. The *Futures of Education Report* reframes humanism from a more planetary, less anthropocentric and decolonized perspective. This epistemic shift can also be seen by the fact that the Faure and Delors commissions were both chaired by French male politicians - Edgar Faure and Jacques Delors - very much rooted intellectually in the Western Enlightenment tradition, while the new report was chaired by a woman from Africa, also a politician, Sahle-Work Zewde, the President of Ethiopia.

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4 M. Elfert, *UNESCO's utopia of lifelong learning: An intellectual history*, Routledge, New York NY 2018.

5 Ibidem.

The shifts between UNESCO's three education Reports indicate the changing dilemmas they were responding to.

- The *Faure Report* responded to the 1968 student revolts in France and civil rights movements around the world. It reflected a sense of crisis that many perceived towards the late 1960s insofar as the unlimited faith in progress had dissipated. At the same time it exuded the belief in the possibility of the birth of a new society and a new political system and a trust in science.
- The *Delors Report* responded to the rise of neoliberalism and the downsides of globalization and it was therefore much more disenchanted about the possibility of a just society.
- The *Futures of Education Report* is responding to our recognition of the damage we have done to the planet, to other living beings and to ourselves, our failure to prevent climate disaster, massive inequality, and epistemic injustice, and it promotes forms of education which will alleviate past injustices. It also responds to the challenges of rapid digital transformation that the *Faure Report* already anticipated.

As such, the *Futures of Education Report* offers a promissory narrative for the future, which provides a welcome alternative to the neoliberal ideology, and its handmaiden human capital theory, which has dominated discussions of education policy globally for many decades. It was refreshing to read a report which adopts a vocabulary that relates to human dignity, co-operation, inclusion and community. This is in marked contrast to the raft of publications arising from the pandemic from international agencies and the global education industry which, under the mantra of “Build Back Better”, imagined a new and transformed form of post-pandemic education. The core feature of those reports was to harness the crisis as an opportunity to promote a form of digital or platform capitalism characterised by a reliance on big data, Artificial Intelligence (AI), neuroscience and technology; a diminished role for the public sector in ensuring greater access to more equitable education; and either reducing the role of teachers to that of technicians or replacing them by new technologies<sup>6</sup>. UNESCO's Report provides a powerful and welcome alternative to these recent digital-reductionist visions of the future, similar to the *Faure Report* in 1972, which challenged the human capital approach to education that had gained ground during the 1960s, and the *Delors Report* in 1996, which challenged the neoliberal commodification and marketization of education.

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6 OECD, *Education responses to Covid-19: Embracing digital learning and online collaboration*, OECD, Paris 2020. Available at [https://read.oecd-ilibrary.org/view/?ref=120\\_120544-8ksud7oaj2&Title=Education%20responses%20to](https://read.oecd-ilibrary.org/view/?ref=120_120544-8ksud7oaj2&Title=Education%20responses%20to) (consulted on 10/05/2022); B. Williamson, R. Eynon, J. Potter, *Pandemic politics, pedagogies and practices: Digital technologies and distance education during the coronavirus emergency*, «Learning, Media and Technology», 45, 2 (2020), pp. 107-114; L. Shultz, M. Viczko, *What are we saving? Tracing governing knowledge and truth discourse in global COVID-19 policy papers*, «International Review of Education», 67 (2020), pp. 219-239.

## The idea of the “social contract”

Whilst the report stresses its desire to initiate or catalyse discussions about the future of education rather than make definitive recommendations, its desired direction of travel is clear; namely to work together to create a new social contract for education which ensures peaceful, just and sustainable futures and rights past wrongs. The proposals to achieve this aim are drawn from a liberal progressive view of the nature and role of education and include:

- a focus on child centred pedagogies, on communities and cooperation rather than competition;
- the promotion of empathy and compassion;
- a concern for the current reliance on comparative metrics;
- a recognition of the role and value of teachers;
- a cautious view of the benefits of technology, neuroscience and AI.

The idea of the social contract represents a key similarity to the 1972 *Faure Report*. The sense of urgency that the *Futures of Education Report* exudes («we now face a serious choice: continue on an unsustainable path or radically change course»<sup>7</sup>) was also very much felt at the time of the *Faure Report*. Although the *Faure Report* does not specifically mention the concept of the “social contract”, it was implicit in the report. The idea was prevalent in the debates on lifelong learning in the context of the *Faure Report*<sup>8</sup> and Edgar Faure wrote a book on that idea<sup>9</sup>. The focus on the social contract was situated in the Keynesian democratic welfare state, the dominant economic model at the time, and was viewed as a means of controlling capitalism and spending its surplus for the benefit of those in need<sup>10</sup>. The idea of the social contract was also related to the 1960s/1970s human rights movement, in which not States, but the public at large became the subject of a vision of global justice<sup>11</sup>.

The *Delors Report* did not use the concept of the “social contract”, but placed strong emphasis on democracy, which was portrayed as the only possible political system that allows for a balance between individual freedom and social cohesion, and the report was concerned about a crisis of democracy. In contrast, the *Futures of Education Report* is much less outspoken about its political vision.

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7 International Commission on the Futures of Education, *Reimagining our futures together*, cit., p. 5.

8 M. Elfert, *UNESCO's utopia of lifelong learning*, cit.

9 E. Faure, *Pour un nouveau contrat social*, Seuil, Paris 1973.

10 M. Elfert, *UNESCO's utopia of lifelong learning*, cit.

11 S. Moyn, *The last utopia: Human rights in history*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge MA 2010.

It makes critical remarks about the backsliding of democracy, but it does not assign the same urgency to democracy as the *Faure Report* did. The concept of the social contract, while featuring prominently in the title, is not clearly defined. For example, the report is not very specific about the parties to the contract and avoids addressing the political stance inherent in the notion of the social contract.

The avoidance of politics is evident in its core idea as to the means for initiating change, namely the need for communities to begin a process of discussion that will create a new social contract for education. This is based on the assumption stated in the report that «education can be seen in terms of a social contract: an implicit agreement among members of a society to cooperate for shared benefit»<sup>12</sup>. This depiction of how education is shaped may be true in some progressive liberal democracies, but it side-steps consideration of the role of power and politics in shaping education and ignores the potential use of education to indoctrinate and sow division. These factors are briefly and obliquely recognised in the introductory chapter but only to provide the rationale for reform, and they do not feature subsequently in the analysis of the future or consideration of how that future will be achieved. In the authoritarian States, in which the majority of humanity live, it is difficult to see how education is a product of such a social contract, nor how the desired co-construction of a new social contract will be initiated in these Nations. For example, we doubt whether the Palestinians, the non-Hindu minorities in India or the Uighurs in China, indigenous groups and refugees around the world, would view the education they receive as the product of a social contract intended to ensure shared benefits.

### The lack of a political analysis of power

The *Futures of Education Report* is aspirational as the previous reports were, but much less political. It describes a utopia that is not grounded in reality. To quote Paulo Freire, who is cited in the report, «Utopia is an act of knowing critically. I cannot denounce an oppressing structure if I do not penetrate into it and know it»<sup>13</sup>. The report lacks a critical analysis of the structural obstacles to the implementation of the ideas it presents, in particular it lacks an analysis of power. For example, the report is very forceful about the importance of schools («If school did

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<sup>12</sup> International Commission on the Futures of Education, *Reimagining our futures together*, cit., p. 2.

<sup>13</sup> D. Webb, *Process, orientation, and system. The pedagogical operation of utopia in the work of Paulo Freire*, «Educational Theory», 62, 5 (2012), p. 602.

not exist, we would need to invent it»<sup>14</sup>) and states that «schools should be protected educational sites», but considers the current model of schooling to be inadequate and calls for its transformation, as schools «too often exclude, marginalize, and reproduce inequality»<sup>15</sup>. Resonating some of the ideas of the “deschooling” movement of the 1960s/1970s that influenced the *Faure Report*, the *Futures of Education Report* calls for alternative forms of schooling and «collaborative and cooperative pedagogical initiatives», such as «community schools»<sup>16</sup>. The report states that «schools must break with the rigid, uniform organizational models that have characterized a large part of their history over the past two centuries»<sup>17</sup> and that the future of schooling needs to be reimagined. For example, «students may no longer be limited to conventional classrooms in future schools»<sup>18</sup>. In marked contrast to contemporary trends towards digitalized education and the atomization of teaching, the report calls for more problem-based, project-based and collaborative pedagogies and teaching as a collaborative effort and reminds us that «the relational work of teachers [is] irreplaceable even by the most sophisticated machines»<sup>19</sup>.

However, the question arises: how we can bring about these radical changes in the social imagination without addressing the relationship between power and knowledge, and without talking about capitalism, financialisation and corporatization and who holds the power over how education is conceived? For example, the report calls for a worldwide, collaborative research agenda that will «enable us to learn together» and «reimagine our futures together», calling for «an ethic of collaboration, humility, and foresight»<sup>20</sup>. How can we achieve that if presently, research is being dominated by corporate profit-making agendas that are deeply entangled with opaque sources of power and corruption<sup>21</sup>? The report presents us with a beautiful vision of how we should be living on this planet, but without any analysis of how we can overcome the structural obstacles towards that vision.

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14 International Commission on the Futures of Education, *Reimagining our futures together*, cit., p. 95.

15 Ivi, p. 97.

16 Ivi, p. 58.

17 Ivi, p. 98.

18 Ibidem.

19 Ivi, p. 83.

20 Ivi, p. 122.

21 H.A. Giroux, *Democracy's nemesis: The rise of the corporate university*, «Cultural Studies ↔ Critical Methodologies», 9, 5 (2009), pp. 669-695; J. Washburn, *University Inc.: The corporate corruption of American higher education*, Basic Books, New York NY 2005.

The report's tendency to avoid consideration of power and politics facilitates its focus on education as the primary means through which societies can be changed for the better.

As the report states: «[...] to shape the futures we want, education itself must be transformed»<sup>22</sup>. In effect education and schools are held responsible for what goes on in societies outside the school gates. As Bernstein opined in the 1970s, education «cannot compensate for society»<sup>23</sup>. Whilst education has provided social mobility and opportunity for many, it has done so in a manner that reflects the priorities and prejudices of the elites in power. By focusing on education it allows those in power to ignore the social and economic problems which are mirrored in education systems.

The calls for a transformation of the ways we do education found in the *Futures of Education Report* are not new, but are part of a long history of pedagogical and educational reform movements. The key questions are: does this report succeed in providing a narrative which challenges that which currently prevails? And will those in power respond to the Report and begin to rethink the nature and purposes of education? Jens Beckett<sup>24</sup> argues that the neoliberal narrative has dominated all aspects of public policy since the early 1990s despite having failed to deliver on its promises. He attributes this to its malleability and the failure to successfully develop an alternative narrative. For three reasons we do not see this report as providing such a narrative.

- Firstly, it provides a vision which can be easily portrayed as utopian and ignored.
- Secondly, UNESCO's prior record is not encouraging; its previous reports failed to abate the emergence of the education systems which the report now seeks to change<sup>25</sup>.
- Thirdly, as has happened before with UNESCO's aspirational educational visions, such as lifelong learning, which spread around the world, but were co-opted by other actors and deprived of its political message, it is likely that the report's humanist vision will be appropriated by the main advocates of neoliberalism, such as the OECD, who are repackaging their neoliberal narrative with a humanitarian wrapping<sup>26</sup>.

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22 International Commission on the Futures of Education, *Reimagining our futures together*, cit., p. 1.

23 B. Bernstein, *Education cannot compensate for society*, «New Society», 15, 387 (1970), pp. 344-347.

24 J. Beckett, *The exhausted futures of neoliberalism: From promissory legitimacy to social anomie*, «Journal of Cultural Economy», 13, 3 (2020), pp. 318-330.

25 M. Elfert, *UNESCO's utopia of lifelong learning*, cit.

26 X. Li, E. Auld, *A historical perspective on the OECD's 'humanitarian turn': PISA for Development and the Learning Framework 2030*, «Comparative Education», 56, 4 (2020), pp. 503-521.

Whilst supporting the overall visionary, optimistic and idealised direction of the new report, we are therefore less optimistic it will challenge the *status quo* and its dominant narrative, or that communities around the world will respond to the quest to initiate conversations designed to create a new contract for education. As T.S. Eliot<sup>27</sup> wrote:

Between the idea  
And the reality  
Between the motion  
And the act  
Falls the shadow.

Our concern is that the shadow cast by this report is so deep and long that, whilst it will appeal to the converted, it will easily be ignored by those in power. That gap between the vision and reality is both deepened by the report's tendency to look through an idealistic lens at both the future and present realities. That lens serves to filter out consideration of how power and politics shape education; and minimal consideration of how to achieve the desired changes.

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27 T.S. Eliot, *The hollow men. Poems 1909-1925*, Faber & Faber, London 1925, p. 128.