

The school for the future

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The pandemic brought us the unfortunate sufferings of a multifaceted crisis that includes a health, economic, institutional, and educational dimensions. Millions are getting sick and dying, losing jobs and income, democracy is increasingly at risk and children and youth are not learning as they should, with schools having been closed for many months and, in some countries, for more than a school year.

In education, COVID 19 resulted not only in learning losses, but also in a deepening of the huge educational inequalities that preceded the pandemic. In this context, we are led to reflect not only on the emergencies imposed by the situation, but on how we will build a post-pandemic future. What was hidden finally appeared in clear light and summon us up to face the present and new challenges in Education, especially in the developing world, with a clear understanding of how quality education may contribute to build a more inclusive and sustainable development.

In September of 2015, at the UN General Assembly, the Sustainable Development Goals- SDGs, were approved by more than 190 countries, including the SDG 4, devoted to Education. The SDGs were intended to deal with new challenges that afflicted the planet: despite some improvements in social indicators and some damage mitigation to the future of the planet, the slow pace of social policies and lack of boldness in building proper solutions was aggravated with what became known as the 4th Industrial Revolution.

This new process translates into an acceleration of automation, with Artificial Intelligence substituting human work for algorithms, which might be a blessing and a curse, depending on the regulatory answers and public policies adopted. A blessing, for if well-coordinated, the process might eliminate indecent work and may also reduce the destruction of natural resources as it avoids waste and emissions.

Yet, even though in previous industrial revolutions, job-creation surpassed its destruction, there is presently some skepticism with this possibility. Will there be work for all and, if so, won't there be a huge increase in social inequality? The honest answer is that even if the net job posts creation is positive, the world of work will not demand the same abilities, and this will require a complete reframing not only of Tertiary Education, but especially of Primary and Secondary in a context of great uncertainties. In these conditions, the toxic mix of unemployment with increased income inequalities, both aggravated by the COVID 19, does not promise social cohesion nor a sustainable future.

I will restrain myself in this text to two questions that are relevant for the years to come: how should we equip the next generations with the necessary competences for life in society , and how could we instill in them, through education, values that may ensure that their existence won't put in risk those of the future inhabitants of the planet.

2- Education and the Sustainable Development Goals

The Sustainable Development 4 establishes that till 2030 we will ensure quality inclusive and equitable education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all. There is, in this statement, an attempt to combine excellence and equity. In other terms, it includes a promise that quality will not be achieved, as it frequently is, to the detriment of inclusion.

The targets in which the SDG 4 unfolds make it even crisper: the idea of ensuring that everyone concludes – not only attend, primary and secondary education, is audacious. But complements the target 4.1, it should be a “free, equitable, and quality” education which should be translated into “relevant and effective learning outcomes”, i.e., besides completing secondary studies, students should effectively learn what is expected for their age-group.

Among the other targets, there is also an especially important one for equity, the 4.2 that establishes that till 2030, quality programs for Early Childhood development will be offered to all, including preschool education, to level the playing field for future learning.

But it is not enough to ensure rights and a qualified access to the world of work. Education has a major role in building a better society that respects life, promotes peace and well-being for the new generations in the planet.

Thus, target 4.7 establishes that we would ensure that all students acquire the necessary knowledge and abilities “to promote sustainable development, learning sustainable lifestyles, promoting human rights, gender equality, a culture of peace and non-violence, global citizenship and appreciation of cultural diversity.”.

This means that in addition to ensuring basic competences, schools should prepare young students to be global citizens that can see the humanity in the other, in an empathic process, incapable of destroying the planet’s resources in a greedy consumerism supported by antiscientific theories.

3. Trends of education in the 21st century and the future of schools

As the world faces a new reality of accelerated automation and jobs extinction, as well as the uncertainties that this new reality brings with it, there is a growing perception that Education will need to be substantively transformed. The world of work is being changed, with formal employment being substituted by other connections between humans and labor and the new job posts demanding more sophisticated skills, since Artificial Intelligence is doing part of the

intellectual work that was previously done by us. This means that we will need to emphasize, in schools, the development of abilities that differentiate us from machines.

In addition, we will need an Education that make us go further than the mere fulfillment of the requirements of the SDG 4, especially to ensure autonomy, employability or entrepreneurship and global citizenship, as well as to face some risks associated with the growth of social inequalities such as the strengthening of populist and authoritarian governments.

In this sense, the main characteristics of the school of the future tend to be:

- Focus in collaborative and creative problem solving, ability that has already caught the attention of PISA, which lead the OECD to create a specific test on this matter.
- Personalization of teaching, that will enable a learning process more customized to the needs of each learner.
- Flexibilization of curricula and the promotion of interdisciplinary approaches, such as project-based learning, to fight the fragmentation of areas of knowledge into isolated subjects.
- Added attractiveness of the teaching career and improvements in pre-service, as well as in-service education, to prepare future teachers for the complexity of the profession
- Development of 21st century skills, such as the socioemotional skills, experiential learning, and student agency.
- Promotion of critical and systemic thinking. According to Joseph Aoun, in his “Robot-Proof Higher Education”, this is highly relevant including in tertiary education, since in the future, AI will not only substitute human work, but will certainly demand higher order thinking skills.
- Development of cultural agility, to allow students to better navigate in different cultures and contexts, understanding values pertaining to each people, without incurring in relativisms and preserving civilizational achievements.
- Creation of an educational ecosystem that includes universities, schools, digital platforms, institutes of technical and vocational education and agencies for skills training and counselling for adult workers facing the eventual waves of job-posts extinction.
- Educating children and adolescents for global citizenship, promoting empathy, non-aggressive communication and social interaction, and fighting xenophobic and racists views.
- Promotion of a sense of responsibility in children, adolescents, and adults for the future of the planet and for the adoption of sustainable habits towards consumption.

4. Some homework for the developing world

Many countries in the developing world have been late to universalize the access to basic education but among them some ensured advances in learning in the last 20 years. Yet, unfortunately, as initial learning assessments in the beginning of 2021 have shown, results have shown that many of the previous advances have been lost. In addition, there is a raising number of students that assert that they do not intend to return to school. As we recover from this recent crisis, we will need, at the same time, to build the school of the future, which includes, among other measures:

- Combining excellence and equity in the design, i.e., high expectations for all;
- Making the teaching profession more attractive with good salaries, non-fragmented contracts, solid pre-service education where a dialog between theory and practice is present
- Using technology, including AI, to support teachers in recovering the losses in learning and promote the personalization of teaching;
- Extending the school journey, including time for deepening the learning and connecting the different subject areas through project-based learning as well as some structured approach to student agency;
- Incentivizing hybrid learning by providing access to connectivity and digital platforms, ensuring autonomy to learn throughout life;
- Engaging students in actions connected to environmental protection and damage mitigation, as well as in tolerance and cultural diversity promotion.

5. Conclusion

The speed of the transformations we are facing in these still unfortunate times does not allow us to anticipate in detail what will happen with humanity in the next, let us say, 25 years, especially in a complex area such as education. I have just tried here to identify some of the challenges that should be addressed in the foreseeable future, to put us in a better position regarding some trends and risks.

For reasons of space, I have concentrated in Primary and Secondary Education. I have also avoided citations and footnotes to ensure a more readable text.

The future depends on what we do right now, and in Education, where we prepare the next generations with the accumulated knowledge of those that preceded them, but also educate them to be disruptive and to build a new path, there should be a sense of urgency. The future is now!

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