

Fall 2019

Interrogating Discourses of Global Education: Reconceptualizing Education as a Common Good?

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Citation of this paper:

Srivastava, P. (2019). Interrogating discourses of global education: Reconceptualising education as a common good? *Research Intelligence*, 140, pp. 23-24.

Interrogating Discourses of Global Education

Reconceptualising education as a common good?



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This contribution focusses on Unesco's (2015) framework of education as a 'common good' with reference to the Global South. That framework is built on the premise that dominant conceptions of education are utilitarian and have not actively incorporated voices of the marginalised. Thus, integrating a humanistic approach to education that counters dominant development discourse is paramount. This means viewing education not merely as the sum of skills acquired, but as a broader social endeavour towards human wellbeing that enables people to live meaningful and dignified lives, approximating Sen's (1999) alternative view of development.

The urgency of such a reorientation is heightened by the framing context for global policy action in/for education: increasingly blurred boundaries between the public and private spheres, and increased private-sector engagement (see Ball, 1998; Srivastava, 2010; Verger, Novelli, & Altinyelkin, 2018). At the heart of Unesco's framework are calls for greater transparency and accountability, as slices of education decision- and policy-making fall outside formal or democratic governance structures; for assessment of the potential impacts of privatisation on the right to education; and for the recontextualisation of the right to education within such framing contexts.

In line with its reconceptualisation, Unesco (2015) proposes the following changes.

1. Inserting marginalised voices into local and global education governance processes and structures.
2. Incorporating alternatives to dominant models of knowledge into education systems.
3. Recognising that the '[r]ight to *quality* education is the *right to meaningful and relevant learning*' (Unesco, 2015, p. 32; original emphasis).

To effect these changes, the Unesco framework proposes reorienting education as a common good. Notably, it extends this conceptual application to knowledge and learning:

'The common good may be defined as "constituted by goods that humans share intrinsically in common and they communicate to each other, such as values, civic virtues and a sense of justice" (Deneulin & Townsend, 2007. [...] Goods of this kind are therefore inherently common in their "production" as well as in their benefits.'

(Unesco, 2015, pp. 77-78)

There are issues that have not been addressed by current global education policy responses, which may be amenable to the application of education as a common good. These gaps have been identified in the Unesco framework as education and unemployment, mobility and learning, citizenship education and the global governance of education policymaking.

EDUCATION AND UNEMPLOYMENT

In the quest to mobilise resources for global education, the link between education and employment has been stressed at the expense of others. By this logic, more education equals more labour market participation, which equals higher economic returns (private and public). This is meant to spur national development, yielding positive social and economic returns. Education is therefore a 'good investment' for the individual and in the aggregate. This conceptualisation is fuelled by a narrow interpretation of development that ties national economic competitiveness to tactical advantage in global labour markets (see Ball, 1998). However, emerging evidence shows that education, thus narrowly interpreted, is not a panacea. There is a critical skills gap that has not kept pace with rapidly evolving labour markets and important '21st century skills', beyond technical skills, are overlooked.

Furthermore, not all groups access labour market opportunities equally. There are normative and structural institutional barriers for historically disadvantaged groups – girls and women in particular – that are not addressed by simply ‘adding’ education without addressing the underlying institutional barriers hindering participation.

MOBILITY AND LEARNING

Increased global flows of people (Appadurai’s [1990] ‘ethnoscapes’) necessitate formal recognition of education, skills and training acquired in different systems. These apply to systems in all countries actively seeking to enrich their human capital pool. Furthermore, mobility affected by contemporary conflicts, whereby people may spend significant amounts of time in camps for refugees or internally displaced persons before (re)settling, also presents challenges. There is a tension between the need for standardised systems for skills accreditation, equivalency and assessment and the need to ensure that such systems are flexible, context-specific and relevant to accessing new opportunities. In short, ‘standardisation’ may not be a ‘dirty word’, and may be necessary to ensure that an increasingly mobile global citizenry can capitalise on life chances. The difficulty is in developing systems that are not overly prescriptive and that do not devalue or discount the significant wealth of experience, education, training and skills that people bring.

CITIZENSHIP EDUCATION

Normative goals and purposes of education in relation to fostering values of citizenship have, at a time in which diversity and ‘global mindednesses’ are crucial, taken a backseat in favour of more utilitarian approaches. This is particularly true when examining international discourses framing global education policy action for the Global South. This prevents values of inclusion from fully penetrating education systems.

GLOBAL GOVERNANCE OF EDUCATION POLICYMAKING

The Unesco framework (2015) highlights data and monitoring systems, education financing systems and international and domestic legal and administrative structures as the key areas in the global governance of education policymaking. Some of these may shift key governance processes outside the national purview, with fewer opportunities for broad-based citizen engagement.

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Despite its normative value, conceiving of education as a common good has gained little traction as a means of addressing these gaps. I have argued elsewhere that acts of framing policy discourse and action are not haphazard: they are deliberate

and strategic exercises that aim to coalesce policy action around a specified (often limited) set of policy options, sometimes with contested logics, and which are conducted by actors who may have multiple or conflicting motives (Srivastava, 2010). More concerted analysis is required to determine the macro- and micro-processes enabling or inhibiting the reconceptualisation of education as a common good. ■

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