

Education and Good Life in Twenty-first Century Global South

Journal of Human Values
28(1) 7–10, 2022

© 2022 Management Centre
for Human Values

Reprints and permissions:

in.sagepub.com/journals-permissions-india

DOI: 10.1177/09716858211073545

journals.sagepub.com/home/jhvv



Since the last few decades of the twentieth century, we have been witnessing a major push towards universalization of school education in the countries of the Global South, both from policy advocates and from the grassroots. This verve in societal aspirations and policy action is definitely encouraging. However, this dynamism should also inspire us to rethink and reimagine the aims and practices of education in a rapidly changing context.

Education as an organized human enterprise is intimately linked to the broader aims of human wellbeing, good life and justice. The policies and practices of *Education for all*, therefore, aim to realize these ideals. This special issue of the Journal of Human Values explores the significance of the prevailing conceptualizations of wellbeing, a good life and justice on education theories, policies and practices in the Global South.

Educational aims, policies and practices have always been contested domains. The landmark UNESCO report of the International Commission on Education for the Twenty-First Century, titled ‘Learning: The Treasure Within’—also sometimes referred to as the Delors Commission Report after the chair of the commission—recognizes some of these apparent paradoxes and contestations in policy formulations. The Commission Report underlines the need to overcome some of these tensions through education in the twenty-first century: the tensions between global and local; universal and individual; tradition and modernity; long-term and short-term considerations; the need for competition and the concern for equality of opportunity; the expansion of knowledge and human beings’ capacity to assimilate it; and finally between the spiritual and the material (Delors, 1998, pp. 17–18).

Let us take an example of the tension between the local and the global. Chatterjee (1986) asserts that the difference between the Global North and the Global South is not necessarily a deficiency or a historical lag, and that modern social and political formations in the Global South should not be represented in a derivative discourse of the Global North. These formulations are inspirational and provide an educator with an opportunity to think afresh. However, committing oneself to these dictums at the broad theoretical level does not save her from facing the quagmires of practising education in a given socio-historical context. Even after acknowledging the fact that it is the arbitrariness of power or historical contingencies (not necessities) which imbue a certain cultural practice and a particular form of school knowledge with a sense of superiority, one cannot evade the question of whether an educational system should provide marginalized sections access to the prevailing resources of cultural power and knowledge systems or not. In order to sense this dilemma on a more concrete level, let us consider the case of English as a medium of instruction and a school subject. One must acknowledge the fact that English is the international lingua franca—of course, due to historical contingencies and not necessarily because there is some unique inherent quality to this language that makes it a global lingua franca. One must acknowledge the fact that a language spoken by a small community of a marginalized group is as effective as English. But should education policy enable access to the English language, particularly when it is demanded by many marginalized groups as a means to acquire cultural power? Now, if an

educational system prioritizes the education of English and education through English, it will further marginalize the language and culture of the group by perpetuating a 'powerful' language. On the other hand, if marginalized groups do not get access to these cultural resources imbued with historically contingent power, they will be marginalized further in a given socio-historical context. Scholar-educator Hilary Janks designates this quagmire as an access paradox and advocates providing critical access to a 'powerful' language like English. She underlines the 'importance of counterbalancing access with an understanding of linguistic hegemony, diversity as a productive resource, and the way in which "design" can be enriched by linguistic and cultural hybridity'. (Janks, 2004, p. 33). Sarangapani's article in this issue brings a similar paradox quite starkly while musing over 'Pedagogy and Diversity'.

Furthermore, the conundrum of education, good life and justice can be addressed from two contrasting approaches to arriving at an idea of a just society. The first approach, typical of liberal conceptions of schooling, where the starting point is an abstract ideal of a liberal democratic society that in turn shapes the designs of various institutional arrangements, including the education system, in harmony with this ideal. The second approach, where the principle of a just society is to start from the actual empirical contexts, which are historically contingent.¹ Rawls' theory of justice is an example of the first approach, while Sen's theory of justice could be identified with the latter. Through a process of approaching a reflective equilibrium under ideal conditions, Rawls (2005) arrives at a political conception of justice premised on the fairness of social institutions. He is primarily interested in justice in the political arena through the design of just social institutions. This enables him to overlook the specific conceptions of good life, as he believes that enabling social institutions allow for the individual's pursuit of a good life, whatever its substantive form. Sen (2009) diverges from what he calls the 'transcendental institutionalism' (p. 5) of the first approach, to a 'realization-focused comparison' (p. 7) of social arrangements that already exist or could feasibly emerge. He bases his approach on enhancing capabilities and opportunities to 'do' and to 'be' what one values. This comparative approach to justice recognizes the actual opportunities for achieving specific conceptions of good lives in given contexts. We would like to argue that the more a society deviates from the 'ideal' conditions that are assumed in the first category of approaches to justice, the less tenable these approaches become as the gap between the portrayal of the ideal and actual historical conditions becomes so much more difficult to bridge post-facto. This is particularly true for many societies in the Global South where the basic needs of a substantial proportion of the population may not be met or the applicability of the rule of law cannot be universally assumed considering historically entrenched structures of power or where social institutions often frustrate individual liberty and equality. The contributions by Siddiqui and Bardapurkar in this special issue address this conundrum.

To overcome some of the tensions mentioned above through education in the twenty-first century, the Delors Commission Report identifies four fundamental types of learning around which education should be organized. First, is the acquisition of a broad general knowledge of the various aspects of their environment and an opportunity to work in-depth with a small number of disciplines; second, is to gain skills for productive work in formal and informal settings depending on one's local and national contexts; third, is to develop an understanding of other people and an appreciation for interdependence in the spirit of respect for values of pluralism, mutual understanding and peace; and finally, develop one's personality and be able to act with ever greater autonomy, judgement and personal responsibility by nurturing every aspect of an individual's potential. It refers to these as four 'pillars' of learning throughout life: learning to know; learning to do; learning to live together; and learning to be. While this articulation encompasses the various aspects of educational engagement comprehensively, the underlying value frameworks that inform the practices of knowing, doing, being and living together need critical reflection and contextual responses. The articles in this special issue critically engage with these questions from the vantage point of education in the Global South.

Drawing from Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*, Bardapurkar argues that education is essential to prepare for a good life. This is achieved through cultivating excellence of the intellect (through teaching) and character (through habituation of virtues) in harmony with human nature. The excellence of intellect is a capacity to achieve a harmony of reason and action, that is, practical wisdom. The excellence of character is concerned with the shaping of desires so that one voluntarily acts in accordance with reason. This account points to interesting problems that are at the heart of this special issue. First, that the idea of a good life is empirically grounded in human nature and specific to the time and place of action. It cannot meaningfully arrive from a 'the view from nowhere'. Further, it highlights the need to tame the desires for one to act in accordance with a reason as an important dimension of the educational endeavour. Mere attainment of knowledge or skills without a focus on developing practical wisdom and a disposition to act in accordance with such wisdom should not be considered education at all.

Sarangapani highlights the pedagogic dilemmas in the teaching of school knowledge in a context of student diversity that is characteristic of the Global South. Drawing on four case studies, she argues that concerns of justice also require teachers to accept this gap between home and school knowledge as a 'deficit' that schools should bridge, in addition to the recognition and respect of the children's backgrounds.

Endow and Mehta look at the relationship between education and livelihoods in the Global South. They argue that, on one hand, we are witnessing high unemployment rates of educated youth, along with underemployment due to skill mismatch and poor school-to-work transition, and, on the other hand, skills that already exist in the economy in informal knowledge systems are largely undocumented and thus not acknowledged in the formal system. They advocate for a stronger emphasis on Technical and Vocation Education and Training (TVET) that redresses the imbalance between formally educated/trained workers and uncertified skilled workers in the informal sector. They further argue that in a labour-surplus country like India, there is an urgent need to push for labour-intensive technology options till the majority of the population has more of a level playing field.

Varma Patil and Sinha challenge the status quo by encouraging us to conceptualize a good society that moves away from what they call 'industrialism' to one based on a reinvention of Gandhi's conceptualization of *Swaraj* for contemporary society. Apart from meeting everyone's basic needs, such a society should be based on a low carbon footprint and ideals of social and ecological sustainability. Further, it should be a society that discourages the acquisition of material goods and power in favour of building deep relationships and an absence of fear. They argue that Gandhi's *Nai Talim* attempts to prepare its learners for an alternative way of being and living to create a society that comes close to this vision. Citing the Zapatistas as an example, they demonstrate that these principles have already been tried out successfully in the contemporary world and initiatives like the Zapatistas indicate possibilities for alternative arrangements for education and a good life.

Kumar's article highlights the constant contestations around the idea of citizenship in the Global South, where nation-building as a project of the state is still a work in progress. Educational institutions become one of the important sites where these contestations are enacted and negotiated. Kumar explores the dynamic intersection of education with the ideas of citizenship and nationalism in post-independent India.

Ries and White's book, *An Aims-based Curriculum: The significance of human flourishing for schools* is an important recent publication on education. Siddiqui's critical appraisal of the arguments in this book finds them to be limiting in the contexts of the Global South. Although he acknowledges the important shift from a subject-based curriculum and gives due credit to the authors for this shift, he argues that educational aims that address the historically entrenched social inequalities and oppression of a majority in countries like India would be more prudent. Siddiqui argues that a utopian conception of a good society is likely to be exploited by the powerful to perpetuate their privileges.

Overall, the articles in this special issue highlight the complexities of aligning the aims and practices of education in the Global South along the four fundamental dimensions of learning identified in the Delors Commission Report for creating a good society and pursuing a good life. In the process, these articles highlight the fault lines in the dominant modes of thinking about education and point towards alternative imaginations of education for a good life and a good society in the Global South.

We are grateful to the editorial team of the Journal of Human Values for providing us with an opportunity to bring this special issue focused on education. We wish to convey our sincere gratitude to all the authors who graciously agreed to contribute articles for this issue. Our special thanks to the reviewers of the articles for providing critical input to the authors and editors. Finally, we will be looking forward to the responses of the readers and an ongoing critical conversation on the issues of educational policies and practices.

Note

1. Embedded in these imaginations of just societies are their stances on the pursuit of good lives.

References

- Chatterjee, P. (1986). *Nationalist thought and the colonial world: a derivative discourse?* Zed Books.
- Delors, J. (1998). *Learning: The treasure within*. UNESCO.
- Janks, H. (2004). The access paradox. *English in Australia*, 139, 33–42.
- Rawls, J. (2005). *A theory of justice* (original edition). Harvard University Press.
- Sen, A. K. (2009). *The idea of justice*. Harvard University Press.

Vikas Maniar

*School of Education, Azim Premji University
Sarjapura, Bengaluru, Karnataka, India
E-mail: vikas.maniar@apu.edu.in*

Manoj Kumar

*School of Education, Azim Premji University
Sarjapura, Bengaluru, Karnataka, India
E-mail: manoj.kumar@apu.edu.in*