



Education. The Global Compact



Workshop, 6-7 February 2020

"The work of education is cultivating the signs of healthy, flourishing, and engaged children. In the Platonic sense, education endeavors to nurture logic (truth), ethics (goodness), and aesthetics (beauty). In the words of the Holy Father Pope Francis, "The mission of schools is to develop a sense of truth, of what is good and beautiful. And this occurs through a rich path made up of many ingredients. ... True education enables us to love life and opens us to the fullness of life."

-- Address with Italian schoolteachers, parents, educators, pupils and other workers, May 10, 2014

Basic primary education in schools has become a normative ideal the world over. Over the last five decades schooling has emerged globally as the most important societal institution for the education of the next generation. UN data suggest the world has made "remarkable progress in participation in education. Enrolment of children in primary education is at present nearly universal. The gender gap has narrowed, and in some regions girls tend to perform better in school than boys and progress in a more timely manner." Progress in the participation of children in schools is a laudable achievement, yet completion and quality education remain a challenge. Millions are out of school and illiteracy remains rampant: 781 million adults over the age of 15 are illiterate. Women make up more than half the illiterate population.

Concentrated poverty, unchecked climate change, the globalization of indifference, an extreme form of which is modern child slavery, thwart the opportunities the flourishing of children. Indeed they represent a significant undertow towards meeting the millennial development goals of reaching universal basic education.

It is by nurturing socio-emotional learning, the values and virtues of engaged citizenship, and by imparting the basic skills to prepare youth for the labor market, that schools become meaningful vehicles for collective empowerment and positive social action. Formal public education must endeavor to inculcate in children and youth humane sensibilities, empathy and perspective taking, communication and collaboration skills, higher-order cognitive skills for critical thinking, as well as the metacognitive abilities to become lifelong learners and civic agents.

Twenty-first-century economies and societies are predicated on increasing complexity and diversity—the twin corollaries of an ever more globally interconnected world and miniaturized world. The gap between what education is and what it needs to be defines the three most important challenges to schools today.

First, basic primary and secondary education remains an elusive mirage for millions of children. Approximately 262 million children and youth are not enrolled in primary and secondary schools. For those who are enrolled, the little education – especially in the form of literacy, will be vital but perhaps not enough to thrive to their full potential. Too many children in low and middle-income countries are falling further behind their peers in the wealthy nations.

The second challenge facing schools is unfolding at the vital link between the wealthy countries in the Northern Hemisphere and the global South. Schools are struggling to properly educate and ease the transition and integration of large and growing numbers of immigrant and refugee youth arriving in Europe, North America, Asia, Australia and elsewhere; many immigrant and refugee youngsters are marginalized as racially, ethnically, religiously, and linguistically marked minority groups. The marginalization of immigrant and refugee youth is increasing and their social belonging is thwarted.

Third, curiosity leads to the great “ocean of truth” and cognitive, behavioral and relational engagement in learning. Sir Isaac Newton’s words echoes through the ages: “I don’t know what I may seem to the world, but as to myself, I seem to have been only like a boy playing on the seashore and diverting myself in now and then finding a smoother pebble or a prettier shell than ordinary, whilst the great ocean of truth lay all undiscovered before me.” But in both high and middle-income countries, the predominant phenomenology of experience for too many youth in school is the antonym of curiosity: it is boredom and disengagement.

Everywhere more is asked of education. It is the Camino Real for development and a driver of wellness. The data suggest that education— almost any form that nurtures and supports basic literacy—generates powerful virtuous cycles. UNICEF researchers conclude: “An education is perhaps a child’s strongest barrier against poverty, especially for girls. Educated girls are likely to marry later and have healthier children. They are more productive at home and better paid in the workplace, better able to protect themselves against HIV/AIDS and more able to participate in decision-making at all levels. Additionally, this ... furthers Goals 2 and 3: universal primary education and gender equality.”

In the PASS workshop on Education: The Global Compact, we shall examine new levers to make education in public schools more humane and equitable, more engaging and fulfilling, and more relevant to the disparate needs of economies and societies around the world. We shall examine, inter alia, the new science of Mind, Brain and Education, the promise of technology to reach and engage children who currently have little or no opportunities for learning, and the education of special populations. We shall address the effects of growing inequality and unchecked climate change on education as well as the tools to reverse the effects of both.