EDUCATION FOR THE 21st CENTURY: 
A LIFETIME TO LEARN

by RICARDO DÍEZ-HOCHLEITNER

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Learning to know, learning to do, learning to live together and learning to be: these four pillars should be the foundations for any educational vision in the 21st century. Going one step further, the Delors Report sees them as the basis for a society valorizing lifelong learning at the heart of society, a concept our dossier illustrates through a generation by generation approach, starting with an actor in his golden sixties who shares his musical wisdom with children. In the US, a preschool programme teaches tolerance at an early age while in Egypt, community schools in remote areas adopt a student centred strategy. Lifelong education provides opportunities, as in Jamaica, where teenagers learn the ropes of the hotel trade. It's also about second chances: in Thailand, companies share their know how with villagers while in eastern Germany, technical training centres help women enter the market economy. Still, despite government pledges recognizing its promise, especially in the context of globalization and rapid technological change, lifelong education remains far from a reality.

The publication of the "Report of the International Commission on Education for the Twenty-First Century", sponsored by UNESCO, is perfectly timed. The century that is drawing to a close has been one of immense paradoxes, with its share of horrors, achievements and unfulfilled hopes. It has been marked by two world wars, horrendous genocides, rapid degradation of the biosphere and the exclusion of rising numbers from the increasing prosperity of the rich. But it has also been a century of great progress in science and technology, which has been marked by the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

Today, with all the knowledge available to us, we have plenty of reasons for optimism, as long as we work together to make sure they bear fruit. For this, we must deepen and extend our knowledge but also live according to ethical and moral values, starting with solidarity and tolerance. This has always been the deep-rooted conviction of educators and of all those who have tried and are trying to do their best for peace and the well-being of peoples; it is also the driving force behind the Report.

Education has always been recognized, though with varying degrees of conviction, as a vital element for individual self-fulfilment and the development of society. The 1960s, however, were a particularly propitious decade for investment in education. At that time, the building up of human capital was seen as a key to economic development. The corresponding social development spurred on by democratization and equality of opportunity, and relatively steady economic growth, created a rising demand for educational services at all levels.
REACTING TO CHANGE

Innumerable local and international initiatives and actions were taken to meet this demand. There have been great achievements, though progress has been spasmodic given the presence of many urgent and serious problems. The need to react to changing situations sometimes prevented leaders from seeing that absolute priority should be given to the sustained effort to promote education and training, research and specialized courses and to make them available to all those with the talent, ability and perseverance to take advantage of such opportunities.

Although not sufficiently recognized in the Report, the last few decades have quite often offered examples of a massive expansion of forms and levels of education, of educational planning to promote democratization and equity, of comprehensive and ambitious reforms to improve quality and of the principle of lifelong education based on the type of society desired for the near future. These efforts have been made despite the uneven and irregular allocation of resources and the varying degrees of importance attached to the many highly complex aspects linked to the tightly interrelated world of learning and education.

Again and again, what has been missing above all – and this is also the view expressed in the Report – has been a broad vision, clearly defined priorities, realistic strategies for carrying out plans, sufficient independence for educational establishments to attain high overall quality, adequate financial and material resources, sensible use of new technologies and a positive and responsible attitude to creativity and innovation. Nor has there been the common sense needed to take into account cultural identity, legitimate aspirations and each society's concept of unity and progress within the framework of effective international cooperation.

As I see it, the reason why so many limitations and difficulties keep recurring has been the absence of sustained political, social and economic awareness – among opinion leaders and the public at large – of the decisive contribution education can make to the resolution of pressing world problems' and to the attainment of more ambitious medium-term national goals, by applying practical methods and procedures suited to each particular case. This would require an intelligent, realistic, ongoing public debate to which all the parties concerned (parents, students, educators, administration, industry, religious and political leaders, trade unionists, etc.) would contribute. Serious debate of this kind would avoid point-scoring and offer solutions geared to changing circumstances, providing regular and objective quantitative and qualitative assessments that would enable improvements and changes to be fed back into the system. This requires a coherent frame of reference, as was as the case, for example, in Spain, when a white paper on the overall restructuring of education led to a reform in 1969 designed to achieve lifelong education. Above all, this was the approach of the 1972 report entitled "Learning to be", of the UNESCO Commission chaired by Edgar Faure, which served as a basis for reforms in several countries.

However, at that time the focus was more limited and more affected by events such as the student revolt, which took a clearly political stance, in a society that unimaginatively saw itself as developing in a straight line towards the future.

The challenges of today are much broader. We are no doubt witnessing the rise of a new era, a new civilization: work is becoming a person's most precious asset; communications (multimedia and cyberspace) are making massive amounts of information available to everyone, and despite globalization, conflict within local cultures is on the rise.
Faced with these challenges, the Report rightly calls for enormous tasks in preparing for the twenty-first century, involving the definition and adoption of new concepts for development and progress (that are at once morally acceptable, effective and viable). It also calls on the political, business and cultural worlds to introduce in each society models of development that are sustainable and appropriate to each situation. We need a type of education that will make an effective contribution to democratic coexistence, tolerance, solidarity and cooperation, in a context of rapid and far-reaching change and growing interdependence among different countries, as the Club of Rome has repeatedly pointed out.

The difficult task is further complicated by the fact that although the education system has helped to effect a break with the past - it has been a decisive ally in support of major social change, economic development and progress in science and technology - it has not completely freed itself from its own past, not even in cases where broad and successful reforms have been carried out. Education is still living in the past because its present social context is totally different from the situation for which it was designed. Education must not only be adapted to the needs of our age, it must also make a real effort to look ahead some 25 years so as to have a vision of a future society that is both desirable and possible to construct.

We are at a crossroads, and it is clear, as the Report points out, that the education and learning system chosen in each country must depend essentially on the kind of society that the people want for themselves and their children. Similarly, the training and apprenticeships of future students in this revitalized lifelong education must take into account the particular rights and responsibilities which they have to accept and assume.

THE WILL TO MOBILIZE

In claiming our rights, we can and must take the future into our own hands. This starts with carrying out our responsibilities. To this end, we need a basic knowledge and a more specific understanding of our specialized fields. To be a real human being and live in peace, freedom and progress, we need education, namely, a process of learning, training and professionalization backed up by the acquisition of positive habits and attitudes. To achieve this, the society in which we live (beginning with family, business, governments, and cultural, scientific and educational institutions) must be convinced of the need for a collective effort to ensure that each and every one of us is able to turn that dream, hope, right and opportunity into a reality.

Only an open and continuous debate can create the political will to mobilize the necessary human and material resources for a knowledgeable society and to treat human capital as our planet's most important resource. This vital debate, this universal human revolution, can and should be set in motion by the "Report on Education for the Twenty-first Century". It is a model of comprehensives, detailed analysis and rigorous synthesis, farsightedness and humanism. All of which is infused with deep sensitivity and respect for the great diversity of circumstances and cultures.
WHO'S WHO IN THE COMMISSION

Formally established at the beginning of 1993, the International Commission on Education for the Twenty-first Century developed its Report over eight plenary and eight working group sessions held around the world. Chaired by Jacques Delors (France), former president of the European Commission, its 14 members are as follows: In'am Al-Mufti (Jordan), specialist on the status of women; Isao Amagi (Japan), educator, special adviser to the Minister of Education, Science and Culture; Roberto Carneiro (Portugal), president of TVI (Televisão Independente); Fay Chung (Zimbabwe), former Minister of Education; Bronislaw Geremek (Poland), historian, Member of Parliament; William Gorham (USA), specialist in public policy; Aleksandra Kornhauser (Slovenia), director of the International Centre for Chemical Studies; Michael Manley (Jamaica), former Prime Minister; Marisela Padron Quero (Venezuela), sociologist, former Minister of the Family; Marie-Angélique Savané (Senegal), sociologist; Karan Singh (India), diplomat and several times minister; Rodolfo Stavenhagen (Mexico), researcher in political and social science; Myong Won Suhr (Republic of Korea), former Minister of Education; Zhou Nanzhao (China), educator, professor at the Chino National Institute for Educational Studies.

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