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Value Visions and Real-World Conditions of the New Social Contract for Education: *Reimagining Our Futures Together: A New Social Contract for Education*

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Abstract: *Reimagining Our Futures Together: A New Social Contract for Education*, released by UNESCO, is another important report on the future of global education, following *Learning to Be* and *Learning: The Treasure Within*. Based on the 2022 Chinese-language edition of this report, this paper sorts out its writing framework and core contents: guaranteeing everyone's right to quality lifelong education, adhering to the two principles of education as a public undertaking and a common good, and proposing the construction of a new social contract for education. It maps out paths for educational innovation from five dimensions: pedagogy, curricula, teachers, schools, and cross-temporal-spatial lifelong learning. It also discusses the transformation of educational research and the reform of global educational cooperation. This paper holds that the report restates the public purposes of education, expands the rights-related and knowledge-related dimensions of educational equity, and makes powerful arguments for "protecting and transforming schools". Nevertheless, its discussion on power asymmetries, interest conflicts and responsibility allocation in the formation of the contract remains insufficient. To turn the new social contract for education from shared visions into reality, more elaborations concerning participating subjects, interest negotiation and public responsibility are still required.

Keywords: Social contract for education; UNESCO; Public good of education; Educational equity

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1. Introduction

Reimagining Our Futures Together: A New Social Contract for Education (hereinafter referred to as the *Report*) is an important ideological report on the future of global education issued by UNESCO, following the Faure Report *Learning to Be* in 1972 and the Delors Report *Learning: The Treasure Within* in 1996. It was collectively compiled by the International Commission on the Futures of Education established by UNESCO in 2019, with its English edition published in 2021. Based on its 2022 Chinese-language edition, the report

extends its time horizon to 2050 and beyond. Starting from the ecological crises shared by humankind and the planet, it raises a thought-provoking question: "What role will education play in shaping our shared world and our common future?" It pursues not merely improvements inside education systems, but further redefines the public purposes of education and puts forward new global ideological initiatives [1-2].

The *Report* proposes to reconstruct "a new social contract for education" based on two principles: first, guarantee every person's right to quality education throughout life; second, consolidate the status of education as a public undertaking and a common good. It intends to reset the value yardstick for discussions on education, namely that evaluation criteria for education should not be confined to enrollment rates, examination scores and labor-market competitiveness. They should also include social justice, ecological responsibility, knowledge sharing, democratic participation and living together in community. It advocates adopting the concept of "common good" to correct excessive competition and instrumentalism in education so as to "forge a new social contract for education". However, the *Report* gives inadequate discussion on how the new contract can take shape amid real-world conflicts over power, resources and interests. It has formulated a relatively complete ideological framework for educational reform, yet further discussions are needed on how these principles can be translated from shared visions into institutional practices.

2. Overview of contents

The *Report* advances theme by theme. It unfolds in the sequence of analyzing real-world crises, putting forward targeted directions for educational innovation, and calling for global action. The two chapters in Part One review achievements in educational expansion and existing inequalities, and analyze changes in today's environment, technology, politics and the world of work. Chapters Three to Seven in Part Two present five potential innovation points: pedagogy, curricula, the teaching profession, schools, and education across time and space. The final two chapters in Part Three shift focus to educational research, knowledge production, global solidarity and international cooperation. The conclusion synthesizes the contents of all chapters, condenses recommendations into a principle framework open to sustainable discussion, and issues calls to global citizens, governments, and organizations. From the urgent need to renovate old models, to reflecting on what needs to be changed within education and how changes can be achieved, and further to discussing what cooperation transformation demands, the *Report* presents a detailed vision for this "contract" [3-5].

Part One describes the necessity for reform through statistics and analysis of existing problems. The *Report* points out that in 1948, roughly 45 % of the world's population had access to formal schooling, while today the figure exceeds 95 %. In 2020, enrollment rates for primary, lower-secondary and upper-secondary education surpassed 90 %, 85 % and 65 %, respectively. Undoubtedly, modern public education has achieved tremendous development and progress.

Part Two elaborates on concrete educational innovations, translating this "new social contract" into five interconnected educational domains. Pedagogy should shift from isolated competition toward cooperation, solidarity and collective inquiry. Curricula shall highlight ecological, cross-cultural and interdisciplinary knowledge, enabling learners both to acquire shared knowledge and to participate in knowledge production. Teachers' work shall evolve from individual labor toward collaborative professionalism, recognizing teachers as reflectors, researchers and public actors. Schools shall be protected as public spaces fostering inclusion and communal living, while their time, space, timetables and student grouping patterns shall be restructured. Educational opportunities shall transcend school boundaries and extend across people's whole lives and

diverse socio-cultural spaces. From an interrelated perspective, these five chapters propose methodologies for educational innovation and systematically answer questions concerning "why we learn, what we learn, how we learn, with whom we learn and where we learn" [6].

Part Three further illustrates that educational transformation is not a set of isolated innovations confined within schools. Modes of knowledge production and international cooperation need to be transformed. Chapter Eight advocates building an education-research agenda oriented toward public missions, bringing teachers, students, communities and diverse knowledge traditions onto the research agenda. Chapter Nine calls for reconstructing international cooperation under the principles of solidarity, reciprocity and subsidiarity to redress resource inequity and one-way knowledge output in global educational governance. The concluding chapter brings all these threads back to the two foundational principles, positioning the report as a starting point for dialogue and issuing calls for dialogue and action to all people.

3. Analysis and reflections

3.1. A new social contract for education

An important contribution of the *Report* is that it brings educational discussions back from concerns over improving system efficiency to inquiries about "what education is for, whom education belongs to, and who has the right to participate in decision-making". The public-education social contract of the past century or more took the basic form of state-provided schooling plus individuals' obligation to attend school. It yielded remarkable outcomes in universalizing literacy, shaping civic identities and boosting social development. Nevertheless, as human-capital theory, international competition and measurable performance gradually took center stage in educational processes, educational purposes were often reduced to individuals gaining diplomas and employment advantages, and states accumulating economic-competitiveness. When educational debates become dominated by measurement and accountability, the teleological question of "what constitutes good education" tends to get marginalized [3].

The two principles serve as anchors for this endeavor. The first principle extends the right to education beyond childhood school-entry rights toward quality education for people across their whole lifespan. The second principle emphasizes that education is a public undertaking and a common good rather than a private consumer good that can be fully allocated by the market. The two principles are mutually complementary. With rights alone and without public accountability, educational opportunities may diverge according to people's purchasing power and platform resources. If only the common good is stressed without safeguarding individual rights, collective goals may suppress differences and minority groups. The "public and common good" of education means not merely public fiscal input; it also means that educational purposes and governance processes shall be jointly defined by members of society [4]. Incorporating non-discrimination, social justice, human dignity, cultural diversity, care, reciprocity and solidarity into the foundations of the contract, the *Report* attempts to forge a new balance between individual rights and collective responsibilities [7-8].

Meanwhile, the expanded connotation of the right to education also reshapes the boundaries of educational equity. Traditional equity-focused discussions mainly center on access to schooling, resource investment and learning outcomes, and these dimensions remain significant. Yet the *Report* further demands curricula to improve learners' capacity to access, use and contribute to shared knowledge, while accommodating local knowledge, Indigenous knowledge and diverse ways of knowing. In other words, educational equity means more than getting a seat in the same classroom. It also concerns whose experiences

count as knowledge, who is entitled to interpret the world, and who can participate in producing shared knowledge. If schools admit minority-group students but keep negating their languages, historical memories and world-making frameworks, formal equality of opportunity may still coexist with deep-rooted epistemic exclusion [9].

3.2. "Protecting and Transforming Schools"

Among the five educational-reform proposals put forward in the report, the initiative of "protecting and transforming schools" stands out. It also marks a key step for the new social contract for education to move from macro-level ideas toward concrete educational institutions. Faced with debates over whether to sustain traditional schools or replace them via technology, the *Report* advocates both protecting and transforming schools. It points out problems within schools such as standardization, hierarchization and disconnection from real-life contexts. Even so, it holds that if schools had never existed, humanity would have needed to invent them. This represents an affirmation of schools' public functions: schools not only transmit disciplinary content, but also offer relatively stable time and communal-living spaces, chances for students from diverse backgrounds to meet one another, as well as care and support delivered by professional practitioners. Therefore, the path forward for the future lies neither in abolishing schools nor in preserving them out of nostalgia, but in retaining their public functions while transforming their organizational forms [10].

Treating mere knowledge "delivery" as the entirety of education would overlook relational and institutional prerequisites that make education possible. Hence, "transforming schools" also calls for rearranging collaborative relationships within school settings. Teachers need time for collective lesson planning, action research and participation in school governance. Students deserve genuine channels to express themselves in curriculum design and campus public life. Schools shall also build stable ties with communities, libraries, museums and other public cultural institutions. In this way, school boundaries can become more open, yet the public responsibilities borne by schools will not be weakened by expanded learning spaces.

3.3. Power and interest conflicts in contract formation

The new social contract elaborated throughout the *Report* cannot be simply dismissed as "lacking operability". Its deficiency lies in insufficient analysis of power-interest conflicts in the process of social-contract formation. The report believes that broad dialogue, collective participation and global solidarity can generate public educational purposes. This position rests on a humanistic standpoint for all humankind and carries necessary moral appeal. Yet the common good is often an outcome of continuous negotiation within asymmetric relationships. Different actors may all endorse grand narratives such as equity and the common good, while holding totally divergent opinions over resource allocation, decision-making power and distribution of reform costs. In reality, various actors often disagree over "what counts as good education", and they possess unequal resources and power. Without confronting such conflicts, value consensus for the contract may remain confined to the abstract level.

Conflicts between teacher autonomy and public accountability are hard to evade. The *Report* calls for safeguarding teacher autonomy, enabling teachers to engage in policymaking and act as knowledge producers. This helps redress excessive administrative intervention in governance. Still, students and families have the right to know educational quality, and governments are accountable for public funds and basic standards. The crux is not a binary choice between autonomy and accountability, but figuring out what form accountability should take. For instance, when accountability mainly relies on single-exam rankings and administrative

assessments, teachers are forced to work around preset indicators. On the other hand, without shared standards, the rights of disadvantaged students may suffer due to disparities among schools. A reasonable contract shall clarify boundaries between teacher autonomy and public responsibility, and involve teachers, students and parents in designing evaluation criteria, so that accountability shifts from answering superior instructions toward being accountable for learners' rights and the public purposes of education.

Disclosure statement

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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