

One world encompassing many worlds

Notes on education for the XXI century

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Krishnamurti used to say that each one of us is the product of our accumulated past and that the world is an extension of ourselves²; undoubtedly, he was also referring to the fact that the future can be built upon the foundation of a liberating learning process, not based on chance or selfish designs.

The future of education and its mechanisms of protection, just as with any phenomenon of culture, will always be the result of our vision and actions in the present since reality does not exist independently from humanity, nor are knowledge and intentions detached from each individual's sovereign and tumultuous learning.

History is fashioned thus – with one hand grasping the present and the other reaching out for the future, pushing and pulling us towards the condition of equality that we should regardless of ethnicity, gender, age or any condition whatsoever.

By proposing a framework of education for the twenty-first century, we are committing ourselves to attempt to eliminate certain practices and those patterns of social and cultural behaviors rooted in ideas of human inferiority or supremacy, as well as to spur democratization processes that lead to the eradication of discrimination and poverty.

Foundation of a living right

Many attempts have been made to explain the miracle of life, many of which are valid, although all of them incomplete. Biological, chemical, religious, legal, metaphysical, even physical definitions have suggested the primacy of life without having defined, however, what exactly it is.

Some of the definitions were adopted by opposition, i.e. explaining what life is not, while others were adopted by completion, seeking to include every existential manifestation.

We know, however, that death is part of life and that even in molecular transformation processes life is a road leading from one stage to another, just as a river follows a course that conforms to the shape of the earth's surface.

For this reason, fundamentalists' explanations have given way to a renewed intentionality that, without renouncing heuristics, focuses on dignifying the elements that make life possible, which are a part of it and form a complex system of energy and passion, never mind the redundancy.

¹ UN Special Rapporteur on the Right to Education.

² Krishnamurti, Jiddu. Notas auténticas de las conferencias y discusiones en Ojia y Sarobia. 1940. The Star publishing trust. México, 1941, p. 30-31.

The learning process as a crucial factor

Life makes its way through the shadows of lifelessness. Its pulse permeates the rhythm of all beings and it extends itself outward just like the orderly heavens above, and in its midst individuals construct their principle tool of survival: learning.

To learn means to adapt, to collaborate and to transform the environment. It is the process by means of which bodies communicate, propose ideas and carry them through; hence, it becomes every society's and every biology's organizing principle.

Far from constraining learning to a cerebral activity of *homo sapiens*, there is evidence showing that the functions accompanying the appearance of the neocortex in mammals only complemented the primitive functions of our ancestors' visceral brains.³ Undoubtedly, these new functions ensued from ancient interactions of primitive humans who learned to understand the world, while populating it with the body of their spirits.

Every step of that learning process has created history and memory. Indeed, the materiality of the body has made it all possible⁴ because the crux of the matter is that the processes of life and learning are the same.⁵ He who does not learn, dies.

Learning always leads to a change in the body's nervous system,⁶ therefore - taking a step further, it means a change within the whole body, the environment and dreams, because nothing exists in isolation from the processes in which life manifests itself.

To insist that the learning process only takes place in the brain is to deny that learning guides the processes of evolution, which cannot be attributed solely to the late appearance of the neocortex, thereby fuelling the false Cartesian dualism that separates intuition and thought.⁷

In fact, learning involves an amazing number of processes within the complex human body, whose memory transcends the brain's activity.

Knowledge of the fact that learning is such a vital function is a paradigmatic finding because it allows us to understand why education deals with life itself, and the reason why it should be dignified and protected.

Principles of Positive Law

Learning is an element of life, an organizational system integrating all ecological phenomena that make evolution possible.

Given this hypothesis, it is valid to affirm that the learning process bursts into the human being by means of cognitive processes that reflect culture and society.

Although the learning process is inherent to humans, it can also be developed and stimulated through the cultural structure known as education.

Education boosts the learning process and gives it a holistic meaning, thus becoming a reference point for life and furthermore, a stimulus to it.

³ Le Doux, Joseph. *El cerebro emocional*. Ariel/Planeta. Barcelona, 1999., p. 103.

⁴ Maturana, Humberto y Pörksen, Bernhard. *Del ser al hacer. Los orígenes de la biología del conocer*. J.C. Sáez Editor. Santiago de Chile, 2004, p. 25.

⁵ Assmann, Hugo, *Placer y ternura en la educación. Hacia una sociedad aprendiente*. Narcea. Madrid, 2002, pp. 49-52.

⁶ Leahey, Thomas Hardy y Harris, Richard Jackson. *Aprendizaje y cognición*. Prentice Hall. Madrid, 1998, p. 4

⁷ *Ibidem*, p. 279.

The first conclusion to be drawn from this is that education has an unquestionable ethic, philosophic and scientific legitimacy. Therefore, the right to education is not only a universal human right, but also a foundation of ecology and development.

The second conclusion shatters the stagnant dualist theory of law, specifically the part dealing with the right to an education.

Indeed, the theory of law being a structure that validates life's dignity has definitely overcome the belief in a natural law (of divine or naturalistic origin) on one hand, and in a positive law (of rational nature) on the other.

This human right thus understood is not a natural or positive principle but an element in the language of and for life.

The right of education focuses on the protection of the learning process as a crucial element that rejects the efficiency connotation characteristic of positive law, as well as the immanent - and thus unchanging, connotation typical of natural law.

The Right to Learn

Human rights protect learning from an ethical and legal point of view. Evidently, I refer to a higher right that does not define vital processes, but rather protects them. It is also a cognitive process because it involves reflexive and practical actions carried out during everyday tasks.

That process departs from the reality of a learning society,⁸ it can only take place in a higher context, what Assmann defines as a "cognitive ecology,"⁹ and in which all beings, human or not, participate; one in which everyone should have a place: an ecology that at the same time has "a world encompassing many other worlds."¹⁰ Another possible world.

Developing an ethical and legal protection of learning is not only essential to ensure some of the most significant learning processes, but also in directing the creation of language (how the world is perceived) as an option to promote human development.

If according to Maturana "we live in the language we create,"¹¹ in all certainty this language mirrors an intentionality, not necessarily rational, that may be directed towards dignifying living creatures, equality, peace and the common good.

Learning is unavoidable or rather, its avoidance leads to extinction. It is unavoidable because action entails knowledge and vice versa: knowledge implies doing.¹²

Therefore, I infer that he or she who does not act, learns not and for this reason, education must be advanced as a human right that honors life as a state of learning.

Returning to education's fundamental objectives is the main idea stated herein, although we know that the regard for education as a human right is still at an early stage. Education must face hard challenges from opposing forces that continue to envision it as the market's

⁸ Assmann, Hugo, op cit, p. 51.

⁹ Ibidem, p. 23.

¹⁰ Ibidem, p. 28.

¹¹ Maturana, Humberto y Pörksen, Bernhard, op. cit, p. 38.

¹² Maturana, Humberto y Varela, Francisco. *El árbol del conocimiento*. Editorial Universitaria. Santiago de Chile, 1998, p. 13.

disciplinary instrument and consequently, as a form of service (not a right) that is subordinate to the economy's interests rather than those of human beings.

The purpose of education is to construct useful knowledge that will dignify peoples' lives.

We are at a point where education can make the difference between life and death. For this reason, to regard education solely in terms of a social or cultural right, is to deny its entire dimension. Perhaps we are also at a point where we should start to discuss learning as a human right because *teaching how to learn* is probably the most important pedagogical course we must promote.

This shall be the future of our struggles in the new century, focusing on overcoming inequality, exclusion and violence.

A thorn in one's side

Upon the enactment of international law concerning human rights, educational systems were called upon to champion the formation of a citizenry respectful of the dignity and rights of all persons, thereby bringing about a fundamental crisis that demanded a redefinition of the very nature of *national education* and exposed all the mechanisms of exclusion in access to education and to educational content.

The existence of a patriarchal superstructure that binds practically all social, political, economic and cultural relationships constitutes a formidable barrier to progress in the realization of human rights.

The social framework of patriarchic beliefs and behaviors has established a conception of the State as a stratified, pyramidal organization, which after time has become fertile ground for systems of exclusion that hinder reciprocal and egalitarian dialogue between human beings.

That patriarchal framework has given form to educational languages, concepts and models and has had a dramatic impact on the institution of learning by validating and reproducing, from generation to generation, stereotypes, prejudices and inequities, sometimes even overriding the will of decision-makers,¹³ and subjugating multiple historical and cultural identities to one single educational project¹⁴ that is prone, therefore, to institutionalized discrimination.

That framework of inequities and asymmetries, actually predating our educational systems, exercises a decisive influence on the organization of our schools. It is a system that defines off-balance relationships between people,¹⁵ placing men and women in a hierarchy of domination that has been advanced as "natural" and that goes beyond gender to include sexist, racist and nationalist discourses.¹⁶

¹³ Millennium Project. Task Force Education. *Toward universal primary education: investments, incentives and institutions*. P. 24.

¹⁴ Bolívar, Antonio. *Ciudadanía y escuela pública en el contexto de diversidad cultural*. Revista Mexicana de Investigación Educativa. ENE-MAR 2004, Vol. 9, Núm 20.

¹⁵ Peoples Movement for Human Rights Learning (PDHRE). *Transforming the patriarchal order into a human rights system toward economic and social justice for all*. New York. www.pdhre.org.

¹⁶ Herrera Flores, Joaquín. *De habitaciones propias y otros espacios negados. Una teoría crítica de las opresiones patriarcales*. Instituto de Derechos Humanos de la Universidad de Deusto. Número 33. Bilbao, España, 2005., p. 29.

Under the protection of patriarchal ideologies, a concept of “Development” has been devised that is more closely linked to the distribution of goods and economic resources than to the possibility of collective learning for overcoming adversities.

The dissolution of this system of inequities will require going forward with the most necessary of historic changes since it will entail a complete transformation of societies and cultures to enable the coexistence of women and men as equals.¹⁷

As Bourdieu suggests, questioning these relationships of domination makes way for a virtual reconstruction of human civilization on more solid ground.¹⁸ But the question remains the same: Are we willing to take on this challenge?

Poverty and limited access to education and health services contribute to the denial of economic, social and cultural rights to historically discriminated groups, while patriarchal traditions multiply the obstacles that prevent women from assuming leadership roles and participating in decision-making processes.¹⁹

The framework of structured inequality and discrimination that is rooted in socialization processes and the construction of gender stereotypes in many of our educational systems,²⁰ also affects children and adolescents, who commonly are conditioned for or incited to intolerant or openly violent behaviors.

Examining the construction of masculinity within the institution of education and the role it plays in the process of development is not therefore simply an analytic exercise, but rather has useful and urgent implications for improving the quality of life in all countries.²¹

From investment to a state of equality

The gulf between intentions and actions in education manifests itself in the framework of patriarchal inequalities and asymmetries, which promote the fallacy of macroeconomic development being the main objective of education, which is usually considered an *expense* and not a human right.

We certainly all expect education to yield economic benefits, but believing this result of education to be its foremost objective is another matter.²²

Therefore, many of the arguments and claims concerning the indisputable need for investment in education reduce the rights of girls, boys and adolescents to vague elements of macroeconomic considerations, like the notion that girls should be schooled primarily in order to accelerate per capita growth.²³

¹⁷ Lagarde y de los Ríos, Marcela. *Los cautiverios de las Mujeres: madresposas, monjas, putas, presas y locas*. UNAM, México, 2001, p 884 p.345

¹⁸ Bourdieu, Pierre. *La domination masculine*. Editions du Seuil, Paris, 1999.

¹⁹ INSTRAW. *Human Rights of Women: New Challenges. Beijing at 10: Putting policy into practice*, 2005, p.9

²⁰ Arenas, Gloria. *La cara oculta de la escuela*. Estudios y Ensayos. Centro de publicaciones de la Universidad de Málaga, España, 1999, p. 1.

²¹ Greig, Alan, Kimmel, Michel, Lang, James. *Men, masculinities: Development: broadening our work towards gender equality*. UNDP. Gender in Development. Monograph series No. 10. May, 2000, p.2.

²² Muñoz, Vernor. *Informe del Relator Especial de la ONU sobre el Derecho a la Educación*. E/CN.4/2005/50, op cit, parr. 13-15.

²³ Matz, Peter. *Costs and benefits of education to replace child labour*. ILO. International Programme on the elimination of child labor (IPEC), 2002 y Abu-Ghaida, Dina and Klase, Stephan. *The economic and human development costs of missing the Millennium Development Goal on Gender Equity*. World Bank. May 2004, entre muchos otros.

Economic growth does not always lead to human development, nor does an adequate budget for education guarantee that resources will be invested in those who need them the most. Consequently, it is improper to consider the fulfillment of the right to education as a determining factor of productive or commercial efficiency, since there is no clear relationship between per capita income and social equity either, especially in peripheral economies.

This utilitarian perspective is detrimental to the dignity of young girls, female adolescents and women because it draws attention away from their needs and misstates the essential objectives of education. For this reason, the strategy has failed in raising the awareness of those in government and financial organizations and has resulted in delays or refusals to modify public policies that validate and perpetuate discrimination.

It is obvious that educational systems must change the objectives and strategies that are not conceived to dignify human beings,²⁴ but it is also certain that many of the greatest problems facing education are not limited to the school systems but rather are found within the broader and essentially discriminatory socioeconomic environment. This is one factor that reveals the failure of educational reforms, by means of which it is hoped that education will solve the social and economic problems that politicians have not had the will to resolve directly.

Rhetoric in favor of the rights of girls, boys and adolescents has done nothing to change the fact that education continues to be one of the last priorities in budgeting considerations and state policy-making.²⁵

The outlook continues to be bleak: 56% of the world population of school age still lives in countries that have not achieved gender parity in primary education, and in the case of secondary education, the figure rises to 87%, given that the disadvantages facing adolescents continue to intensify.²⁶

At the close of year 2005, we became aware that the objective of gender parity provided for in the Millennium Development Goals was not met in 94 out of 149 countries, from which data is available.

Eighty-six countries are in danger of not achieving gender parity even by the year 2015; seventy-six countries have not even realized gender parity in primary education.²⁷ Girls continue to suffer from these disparities and female youngsters with disabilities and the indigenous continue to be the poorest of the poor.

In any case, the notion of parity, which involves a simple count of young girls and female adolescents enrolled in school, does not reflect the more substantive concept of gender equality envisioned by the Beijing Declaration and its Platform for Action (1995) and therefore is useless in evaluating progress made in the quality of education.

What is certain is that one hundred and twenty million boys and girls continue to have no access to education and at least twenty-three countries run the risk of not achieving universal primary education by the year 2015.²⁸

²⁴ UNESCO Asia and Pacific Regional Bureau for Education on behalf of the Sub-regional EFA Forum for East and Southeast Asia and the UN Thematic Working Group on EFA. *Guidelines for Preparing Gender Responsive EFA Plans*.

²⁵ World Economic Forum. *Women's Empowerment: Measuring the Global Gender Gap*. Geneva, 2005, p.1.

²⁶ UNESCO Institute for statistics. *Global education digest*, Montreal, 2005.

²⁷ Global Monitoring Report (EFA). UNESCO 2006.

²⁸ Global Monitoring Report EFA. UNESCO 2006. *Panorámica del informe*. 2005.

In South Asia, 23.5 million girls do not attend school and in Central and West Africa, practically half of all girls are also excluded.²⁹

To this scenario should be added 10 million boys and girls in the Arab world who receive no formal schooling,³⁰ thousands of Roma children who face discrimination in Europe, hundreds of thousands of schoolchildren who suffer the consequences of poverty and inequity in North and South America, and 25% of the population above the age of 15 in Central America who are illiterate, most of whom are poor girls or women, are indigenous people and live in rural areas.³¹

On the American continent, many countries have been subjected in recent decades to political and institutional reforms that have sought to reduce public spending and eliminate social and economic programs, and have had a serious impact on education.

Upon carrying out these reforms, many Latin American states have had to nearly eliminate their social assistance functions and abandon their guarantees of economic, social and cultural rights, which has resulted in a substantial decline in the funding of education, consequently aggravating the asymmetries.

In many cases, military budgets continue to grow to the detriment of education and at this rate, according to the most optimistic projections, meeting the goal of universal primary education will take at least ten more years than expected. In 2015, there will still be forty-seven million children not attending school, and forty-seven countries will not meet the objective of universal schooling until practically the middle of the next century. Currently, in these countries, the mothers of 75% of all girls and boys lack a formal education as well.³²

Consequently, the search for opportunities and alternatives should facilitate a new interpretation of the processes of democratization in all spheres of public activity that ensures that minors are included in decision-making and the mechanisms of accountability for adults.

Child domestic labor, whether it is performed for salary or in conditions amounting to slavery, continues to be a principle source of exploitation and violence against children and has reprehensibly pulled 250 million girls and boys out of school, nearly a fourth of whom have not even reached the age of ten.³³

Adolescent marriage, pregnancy and motherhood pose a direct threat to educational opportunities, and the matter is compounded by the absence of sex education, which has also aggravated the HIV/AIDS pandemic and has hindered the construction of a masculinity that is sensitive, responsible and happy.

The protection of very young and adolescent girls from the causes of exclusion related to sexuality and gender-based violence at school not only demands world-wide attention of the highest priority but also involves and commits the entire educational apparatus, from the production of textbooks to the construction of sanitary facilities to the hiring, awareness-raising and professional training of teachers.

²⁹ UNICEF. *Progress for children*. Number 2, New York, april 2005, p. 4.

³⁰ Bahrain Tribune, 28 June 2005.

³¹ PNUD. *Segundo Informe sobre Desarrollo Humano en Centroamérica y Panamá*. 2003. p. 31

³² PNUD. *Informe sobre desarrollo humano 2005: La cooperación internacional ante una encrucijada: ayuda al desarrollo, comercio y seguridad en un mundo desigual*. New York, 2005, p. 7- 49.

³³ <http://www.hrea.org/conversations/child-labour.php>

This is one of many challenges we will face in the years to come that include eliminating those notorious means of excluding disabled persons, migrant groups, the imprisoned, indigenous populations, ethnic and cultural minorities such as the Dalits and Roma and, let us not forget, those brutally forced out of school by military conflicts.

It is estimated that at least half of the 120 million boys and girls who receive no formal education live in countries plagued by warfare now or in the recent past.

Of the 3.6 million persons who have died in wars since 1990, nearly half of them were children.³⁴

Quality, content and diversity

We have demonstrated repeatedly that access to schools, in and of itself, is not a guarantee of any kind and that fostering quality education, based on learning and the fulfillment of human rights, is essential to developing an effective resistance to all forms of exclusion and discrimination,³⁵ given that gender stereotypes, threats to children's emotional security and curricula that are insensitive to diversity all work together to obstruct the fulfillment of the right to education.³⁶

Resistance to the function of education in accordance with its true purpose obstructs meaningful learning, since knowledge gained without the development of a personality respectful of human rights is substandard knowledge. Consequently, the only relevant and adequate kind of education is that which is based on, implements and bolsters human rights.

Quality, therefore, cannot be reduced to some quantifiable measurement of efficiency, but rather it encompasses the full scope of human commitment to the present and future of all persons.

The right to education constitutes a collective responsibility involving respect for the individuality of all persons; it is diversity put into practice, insofar as learning entails recognition and respect for *the other*, whether him or her, and therefore acknowledging the possibility of consensus, while being willing to accept dissent and promote respectful dialogue aimed at peaceful coexistence.

However, if we expect educational systems to promote intercultural practices, we will be obligated to reflect on a redefinition of the State, because the coordination of democratization processes is our most important challenge at hand if we are to transform the public sector and the education sector in particular.³⁷

The emerging nature of political, economic and territorial relationships would seem to be gradually replacing the national reference point with that of a particular region or the world,³⁸ for which reason students should be encouraged to respect civilizations other than their own,³⁹

³⁴ UNICEF. *Estado mundial de la Infancia. 2005. La infancia amenazada*. New York, 2004, p. 10.

³⁵ Muñoz, Vernor. E/CN.4/2005/50, op cit, parr 8-9.

³⁶ Plan de acción de la primera fase (2005-2007) del Programa Mundial de Educación en Derechos Humanos, parr. 13.

³⁷ En términos similares, Krawczyk, Nora y Vieira, Vera Lúcia. "*Estudios comparados nas análises sobre política educacional da América Latina*". EN: América Latina: Estado e reformas numa perspectiva comparada. Cortez Editora. Sao Paulo, 2003, p. 116.

³⁸ Una tesis parecida se encuentra en: Vélez De La Calle, Claudia. "*La libertad de enseñanza en un contexto intercultural, su dialogicidad y sus retos en la globalidad*". EN: www.genesis.amigomed.edu.co.

³⁹ Artículo 29 inciso c) de la Convención sobre los derechos del niño y la niña.

and this suggests that the matter of interculturality should be fully incorporated into all educational systems.

In addition, the necessary construction of active, inclusive, responsible and autonomous citizenries should be on a foundation of cultures, languages, native traditions⁴⁰ and common law, as well as of the deconstruction and interpretation of human rights.

That interaction within the sphere of autonomous peoples and individuals leads to an extremely rich learning and encourages the strengthening of aptitudes and opportunities, given that the greater the wealth of endogenous educational experiences, the better and more comprehensive will be those resources allocated to education.⁴¹

There are some international trends espousing a conception of the right to education based on pedagogical standards form which is derived a standardized and rationalistic educational system. These standards could be of some importance, but they also entail formal, conceptual and linguistic relationships that reflect a patriarchal model disguised as social cohesion, which in the end banishes and discriminates.

By its own nature, this model fears its foretold defenestration. Perhaps, for that reason, it insists on subjecting all processes of socialization to the same scale and measure.

Homogeneity is an unattainable goal in education, since the steadfast will of the nation-state is incompatible with interculturality. The pressure on indigenous linguistic minorities to give up their mother tongues, for example, demonstrates the intolerance that fosters patriarchy.

Attempts to eliminate our young people's language and their own peculiar art of expression also constitute a form of violence against them that has no place in educational requirements.

The right to education for all peoples begins with the need to maintain and express an essential sense of belonging and a sense of one's roots, which are related to another sense, that of resistance framed by social, cultural and political autonomy.

Moreover, this right to education involves developing ways of guaranteeing the enrichment of educational forms based on the realities and aspirations of the people themselves.

However, those in favor of conventional systems are averse to the new concept of education based on interculturality and they fear to tread near it as if it were an abyss, since it goes beyond the mechanical approach of their pedagogy, which serves market demands.

According to the predominant model of traditional educational systems, learning is considered a *product*, just as nature is transformed into a commodity.

The same systems in place for protecting human rights have on occasion succumbed to that trend, rejecting the supremacy of economic, social and cultural rights, to which a "programmatic" or "progressive" character has been formally attributed.

The "programmatic" imperative of economic, social and cultural rights is motivated by a rationality that leads to inequality because it focuses on a concept of the State bolstered by a working dysfunctionality derived from the poor distribution of wealth.

⁴⁰ Actualmente habitan 40 millones de indígenas latinoamericanos-as, que hablan 500 lenguas diferentes y una incalculable cantidad de dialectos.

⁴¹ Instituto Interamericano de Derechos Humanos. *Campaña educativa sobre derechos humanos y derechos indígenas*. San José, 2003, p. 173.

In practice, therefore, the progressive character of these human rights has signified an authorization of States to violate them. In the case of education, we have experienced moreover a sharp decline not only because millions of boys, girls and adolescents still do not attend school, but also because educational content, in many cases, is more geared toward the needs of employers than peoples' legitimate aspirations, thereby obstructing the construction of learning processes, with consequences we have been warning about throughout this exposition.

The reaches of memory

I must say, however, that none of these aspirations constitute new voices in history because the world has grown from these roots and because hope has also learned to reap its benefits since humanity was in its infancy.

The historical character of human rights has a dynamic drive that cannot easily be stopped and that is present in every ecology, in every body and motion.

Every dream and every struggle leaves behind its wake. In the same way, every regulation of rights on the old shelves of the UNO deals with the living memory of peoples, persons, girls, grandmothers who lived by raising their voices in opposition to oppression and death.

The voices have come this far. From here on, the learning that was planted by hardships is blossoming. Now it is up to us to give meaning to that memory, so that there will no longer be inequality, no more closed doors, no more empty classrooms.

If despite everything, nothing happens, it will be time to begin anew and look back at what we have done with the simplest of rights and the most arduous of conquests, which is to live and grow with others.

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