

Teach the Future

Written Inputs for the Preparation of the Zero Draft of the Pact for the Future

P Bishop, 12/30/23

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Youth participation, and consequently trust, in decision-making is strengthened when youth and the adults they will become are schooled to anticipate the many, diverse changes they face and to influence those changes at the individual, community and global levels. Our recommendation, therefore, is to urge Member States and their Ministries of Education to develop a sound and rigorous curriculum to teach futures thinking skills in their schools and to train teachers and other educators to offer it to their students.

Chapter IV. Youth and future generations

I am writing on behalf of Teach the Future, a global NGO with a presence in more than 30 countries that advocates for a change in the school curriculum to meet the objectives of Agenda 2030.

Background

The Sustainable Development Goals were released as “a shared blueprint for peace and prosperity for people and the planet, now and into the future.” It was intended “for the full benefit of all, for today’s generation and for future generations.” It states further that “The future of humanity and of our planet is ... in the hands of today’s younger generation who will pass the torch to future generations.” Isn’t it reasonable then that we teach students about the future they are heading toward, how to navigate its uncertainties and how to influence it for their good and for the good of all people?

SDG #4 states the goal for education – “Ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all.” Inclusion, equity and life-long learning are crucial, but what about quality? What do students learn when they do get to school? Is it a backward-looking curriculum that only teaches them facts from the past, but also a forward-looking curriculum that helps them navigate an uncertain future and acquire the agency to identify and work for their preferred future?

Preparing young people for the future has been a core mission of public education since its founding. Nevertheless, the future is rarely, if ever, addressed in the classroom. That was understandable when the complexities and uncertainties of the future made it impossible to teach about the future with the same rigor that other subjects enjoyed. But that has changed.

A thriving field of futures studies and futures literacy which began shortly after the devastation of the World Wars. We have been educating adults on how to approach an uncertain future for 50 years now, beginning with the University of Houston which offered the first degree in Studies of the Future in 1975. Since then, universities in many countries, such as Finland, Germany, Italy, Mexico,

South Africa, Taiwan, and the United States among others, are offering degrees in futures studies. Universities, NGOs and companies are now offering short courses for adults in strategic foresight. The University of Houston and its spinoff, Foresight Fundamentals, alone have served almost 2,000 adults since 2009. We are teaching adults how to deal with the uncertain future, but we are not sharing these skills with young people in their schools where they spend most of their time.

Pact for the Future

At least three of the Policy Briefs supporting the Summit of the Future deal with this topic:

- Brief #1 reminds us of our obligations to future generations. The young people in school today are the first wave of those future generations. We should tell them about what we know about the future and, more importantly, stimulate them to imagine their preferred futures and help them plan and create their preferred future. They should not have to wait until they grow up to learn that.
- Brief #3 calls on Member States and UN organizations to systematically include young voices in deliberation and policy making. That voice would be stronger and more persuasive if it were backed up with a solid understanding of what we expect in the future and what else could happen instead. Students with an awareness and the knowledge of today's challenges and opportunities can make a substantial contribution to policy, but only if they learn about those futures in school rather than only through the media.
- Finally, Brief #10 focuses on education itself. It calls for an education system that includes "curricula and pedagogies relevant for today and for tomorrow." It also recommends to "reposition the teaching profession to ensure that teachers increasingly serve as creative guides and facilitators in the learning process." Futures studies is an ideal vehicle to introduce these skills since there are no facts about the future to learn by rote, only the skills to understand, discuss and develop one's knowledge and attitude about the future. The 4C skills (communication, collaboration, critical thinking, and creativity) can be taught in history, mathematics and science, but they are the only way to teach about the future. The future has no facts to memorize and give back on a test. We can only understand the future by using these skills.

Conclusion

Young people's participation in policy making would be more substantial and meaningful if they have learned how to think about, discuss and influence the future before they participate. Futures literacy is also useful for other parts of their lives, such as career planning, their contribution at work, and their general participation in governance as citizens.

In 2016, Teach the Future participated in [Education 2030](#), an OECD initiative to identify learning objectives focused on skills more than just information. Some of the skills the OECD identified were creativity, critical thinking, problem solving, goal setting and decision making ([OECD Future of Education and Skills 2030 Concept Note](#), 2019), all of which are attributes of futures literacy. Teach the Future can continue in that direction and use its work there to include futures literacy in the standard curriculum on behalf of the UN's mission in education.

So far policy makers and educators have focused on the future of education, which is welcomed. At the same time, however, we should include young people in the discussion by putting futures into education, by making it an explicit part of the curriculum.