Mind the gaps: The world needs to radically transform its educational systems, not just upgrade them

November 26 2022, by Gaëll Mainguy, François Taddei and Leonora Dowley

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In September 2022 the United Nations organized the first-ever high-level [Transforming Education Summit](#), inviting stakeholders to put forward commitments and tackle the challenges we face. Once again we heard how staggering the needs are: in lower-income countries, 25% of young people and just over 55% of adults are still illiterate, while 250 million children remain out of primary school.

The World Bank's ["State of Global Learning Poverty"](#) report notes that disruptions such as the COVID-19 epidemic, the war in Ukraine and the Taliban's ban on [secondary education](#) for girls in Afghanistan have

"sharply increased learning poverty, a measure of children unable to read and understand a simple passage by age 10".

As the [Brookings Institution](#) notes on the need to urgently transform [education systems](#):

"We are at a critical inflection point with hundreds of millions of children likely to miss out on a quality education at the very moment where we have to confront [climate change](#), increasing conflict, and renewed pandemic risks."

In addition to the climate crisis, humanity faces many urgent issues: biodiversity, food, water, energy, poverty, inequality, democracy… the list is long. All are intertwined and profoundly difficult to resolve, and we face a global [tragedy of the commons](#). The UN's [sustainable development goals](#) were established to provide a comprehensive framework and set "a shared blueprint for peace and prosperity for people and the planet, now and into the future". But we are not on track to achieve them.

During the UN's education summit, there was a clear indication that all the parties needed to address these issues were not at the table. Funding

and investment was absent, and while the IMF and the World Bank—both of whom were invited—were not present. Approximately half of the leaders that were expected also failed to turn up, with many choosing to attend Queen Elizabeth II's funeral instead.

Without having all the major political and financial players at the table, how can we create a shared blueprint for critical education and climate reform? There is a gap, even an abyss, between the issues we face, the communities facing them, and those in a position to tackle them.

A week after the summit came the Global Futures Conference, organized by Arizona State University and the Earth League during New York Climate Week. Its mission was to identify "solutions that are ambitious and achievable" and "intended to propel societies toward a future of opportunity rather than sacrifice". The gathering identified education as one of the key levers of transformation, yet again there was a gaping void, this time between the education and climate and sustainability actors, with the Learning Planet Institute one of the only organizations to attend both events.

We know that education for climate action has the potential to reduce up to 20 gigatons of carbon dioxide by 2050, a better outcome than more than three-quarters of the top climate solutions available today. Yet most education systems today are not preparing students and learners to adapt to these challenges, much less to address them.

We need to put systematic solutions in place very quickly to engage learners (young people, those in higher education, and lifelong learners) and to help them understand how to tackle challenges collectively. It is no longer sufficient to try to upgrade the system—the gap is simply too large. Instead, education itself needs to be radically transformed. In the words of UN Secretary General António Guterres, "Education must help people learn how to learn, with a focus on problem-solving and

collaboration".

Recent reports from [Rewired](#) and [Brookings Institution](#) agree that the different planetary crises require a reassessment of the purpose of education:

"Transformation means repositioning all components of the education system to coherently contribute to a new, shared purpose."

We know what competencies are required: cooperation, empathy, self-awareness, [futures literacy](#), collective problem-solving, critical thinking, and the ability to learn how to learn and how to unlearn. Many frameworks are available, including UNESCO's ["Learning to transform the world"](#), but still the majority of education systems do not act on this knowledge.

Transformation frameworks, youth inclusion and radical change

In practice, we know there is vast experience in the world to implement change. Indeed, within the [Learning Planet Institute](#)—an initiative we launched with UNESCO to celebrate and bring to light the transformative solutions being developed around the world—we see remarkable examples of programs that foster autonomy, ability and motivation to learn, act and lead for a better world. [Catts Pressoir](#), [Escuela Nueva](#), [Dream a Dream](#) and [Design for Change](#) are just a few examples of K-12 programs in Haiti, Colombia and India that shows that these teaching approaches are not restricted to the Western World.

In higher education, many universities and governmental bodies have launched programs that go beyond sustainability literacy, to prepare the new generation to lead the environmental, social and societal transitions to come. These include the [College of Global Futures](#) of Arizona State

University, the [Bachelor ACT](link) of Cy Cergy Paris, the [Center for Sustainability Transitions](link) of Stellenbosch University and the EU's [Open17 platform](link).

At regional and national scales, we are also seeing examples of systemic transformation in action adapted to the local context: in Sierra Leone, ["Transforming Learning for All"](link) is an ambitious, comprehensive and innovative plan to improve education outcomes, in particular for girls, students with disabilities and children living in remote areas. Another inspirational example is British Columbia's [curriculum reforms](link). The "Know-Do-Understand" framework they use:

"honors the ways in which students think, learn, and grow, and prepares them for a successful lifetime of learning where ongoing change is constant".

While Singapore regularly topped PISA international rankings, it was also well known for systematic testing and ranking procedures that induced high levels of [anxiety and fear of failure](link). In 2019, they embarked on a [profound reform of their education system](link), noting that learners should no longer be competing with one another. Instead, they should be encouraged to learn how to learn, how to cooperate and how to develop their creativity. Their example speaks volumes about the fact that radical change is possible.

Importantly, we also know how eager young people are to be involved. That the [Youth Declaration on Transforming Education](link) received more than 450,000 contributions demonstrates how much young people want to be meaningfully engaged in education policy and decision-making as full-fledged partners, and not just beneficiaries. Co-constructing with youth and [empowering young people](link) is now recognized by Antonio Gutteres as a core principle for building tomorrow. Young people are literally the future, so they need to be part of designing it.

We need to stop preparing [young people](#) for a [world that no longer exists](#). Instead, we should all be given the opportunity to learn about our common global issues, how to thrive and engage in addressing them. These ideas are not really new. In fact, UNESCO's 1972 report ["Learning to be: the world of education today and tomorrow"](#) was already advocating that:

"[People] should no longer assiduously acquire knowledge once and for all, but learn how to build up a continually evolving body of knowledge all through life."

How to close the gaps

Implementing these transformations has never been more urgent, but it cannot and will not happen without the proper political attention and appropriate funding.

It is essential that all stakeholders concerned by these issues, in particular the public and private financial bodies with a focus on climate change mitigation and solutions, come to the table. Together, combining education expert knowledge and investments in [education](#), we can bridge this critical gap between learning and the environment and drive the radical systems transformation required to serve the needs of youth and our planet.

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