

A leadership challenge paper in support of UNESCO Futures of Education 2050

School as a Meeting Place – A Vision for the Futures of Education

Sabrina Rokerya

Department of Leadership, Higher and Adult Education, Ontario Institute for Studies in Education

sabrina.rokerya@mail.utoronto.ca

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School as a meeting place – ideally is this not what it should be? More so, what school could be? Learning environments have seen different landscapes, frameworks, and models throughout the course of time, but one common and uniting factor, apparent in every societal structure is the building and growing of community. In communities all around, and in the larger sense of the word, we have different roles that are played by different actors and bearers of agency. When it comes to educational community, a school, an environment where seekers of knowledge are placed at the centre and at the core of the learning experience, we enable spaces in which learners can grow and build together. To see school as a meeting place is to see school as a place where a collective comes to learn, to grow and to become. Recognizing that each member of this community comes in with their own trajectory, that caters to and further enhances the learning experience for themselves as well as their peers, we place value on what learners already know, enriching their funds of knowledge, and allowing them to grow in a direction where they add to their learning trajectories, while learning from each other. Throughout this paper, I would like to highlight the themes of *Belonging*, *Affiliating*, and *Plurality*- how they tie in to one another, and can be seen as a construct for the futures of education.

The past and the present cater into this object called the future, and transcending the familiar (Rüsselbæk Hansen & Phelan, 2019) calls us into a space where we might value what we do not know, but could learn from the other. Embarking on a journey where we enter a space in which the familiar can be exchanged with other positions and perspectives allows us to recognize the *Us*, but also the *It* and the *Them* (Godet, 1987). As we move towards a paradigm shift, we must not forget that learners are “...capable of developing a sense of belonging, while affiliating with a plurality of other identities as well” (Dagenais, 2013). We must cater to the

ongoing needs of humanity, one that roots from the idea of ‘always evolving’ and a continual process of growth. To think of this with the idea of where change is leading us, we can build towards a global future of education that offers autonomy, leadership and empowerment to all learners, enabling them to learn through collaboration, building trust, fostering empathy, valuing agency of the self, and agency of the other.

‘*Toujours en mouvance*’ and the future as an object, in motion

When we think of identity, we think of it as something that is always in evolution. In French we say “*toujours en mouvance*” to state that something is always *moving*, and by virtue of always moving- is always growing, building, evolving. When one travels, far or near, out of the home, into the school, into a new country, place, or environment, meets a new friend, peer or colleague, a layer of evolution is added to their identity. Our trajectories are always moving, *toujours en mouvance*. Affiliating through plurality allows us to find a sense of belonging while valuing the construct of diversity that is prevalent and present in society and all around us.

The relationship between school and society is an important one. When thinking about pedagogy and the role of schools, we think about the idea of coming together, or a form of publicness. Publicness can also be seen as something, a relationship, that is always shifting, or an ever-shifting process. We continuously ponder the discourse around educational quality, striving for improvement, and bringing to light questions of equality around the world. Gert Biesta (2012) reminds us of public pedagogy as a pedagogy of the public, of common spaces and places, and one idea being the enactment of a concern for the public quality of human togetherness. Through human togetherness we see emergence of freedom, which lead to the *becoming public* of spaces and places (Biesta, 2012). In his work on redefining the democratic work of education, Biesta also points out the trajectory of the modern school.

In many places around the world the modern school is under a relentless pressure to perform and the standards for such performance are increasingly being set by the global education measurement industry. All this puts a pressure on schools, teachers and students but also on policy makers and politicians, who all seem to have been caught up in a global educational rat-race (Biesta, 2019).

Looking at the public as an object, we can also recognize the future as an object, both being objects or possibilities for *Belonging*, *Affiliating*, and *Plurality*.

Learning to Become as Learning from each other

School as a place where learners meet other individuals who may or may not have the same trajectories, journeys and experiences as themselves, can produce an environment conducive to the ongoing development of human collaboration, identity development, and emotional sustainability, all of which are always in evolution or *en mouvance*. UNESCO's Futures of Education initiative, titled *Learning to Become* brings forth exactly that- "...a philosophy of education and an approach to pedagogy that views learning as a process of continual unfolding that is ongoing and life-long" (UNESCO, 2020). Being open to learning the new, and while doing so, recognizing the *Us*, the *It*, and the *Them* (Godet, 1987), along with the places each of these have in the continual process of acquisition and learning, serves as a tool for developing strength through diversity. UNESCO's vision and initiative also embark for us a journey through which we reflect on the outcomes of human-caused changes to ways of living, changes to the planet, and the perpetual effects on societal norms, social organizations, challenging the status quo by bringing in radical change and developing high levels of trust, seeing growth and transformation in human awareness, consciousness and the development of human identity as well the needs of humanity.

Seeing that each of us hold a place in society, yet seeking what we want to become as what we have not yet become, helps us hone our pathways to success by valorizing our already acquired and built trajectories, with the goal of always moving that forward, adding to it, and building upon it. Initiatives such as UNESCO's Mother-Tongue Based Multi-lingual Education, and International Mother Language Day; the promotion and preservation of linguistic diversity as part of UNESCO's Education 2030 Agenda, place language as a core necessity for identity development. While preserving mother-tongues, home languages, and linguistic skills that students already possess, while creating opportunities to learn the "new" or the "other", we pay attention to basic human needs of feeling valued in who we are.

With an approach of School as a Meeting Place, each student brings in their own identity, and further develops skills strengthened by communication, social integration, and importance placed on recognizing diversity in people and the planet. If we lose respect for diversity in language and communication, we see a decline in the individual and communal resources and treasures that come with cultural diversity, intercultural learning, and the creation of sustainable and empowering dialogue. How do we go about promoting sustainable growth in education systems, by valorizing linguistic and cultural diversity, nurturing inclusion, fostering safe shared spaces, while seeing linguistic variety as a tool and a resource, valuing the development of linguistic competence, and further creating an openness to intercultural education, communication and empowerment?

Identity, mental health, and well-being

Thinking of the future as an object rooted in the plural nature of diversity, we can focus on notions of co-construction that impact identity development, awareness of the self and awareness of others. With the building blocks of co-construction and engagement with one

another, we place empathy at the core of connection. Staying connected as we have seen, is essential today, in life amidst a global health crisis. Learning from each other provides a sense of autonomy building in learners, and allows them to feel their place in a collaborative and shared space, where each learner has their own agency. This agency can develop into empowerment in the learner, to share, to learn and to acquire. If we work towards changing the face of a status quo- to bring radical change, to create and to foster environments conducive to identity development, we are in turn taking a step towards global well-being.

The Mental Health Commission of Canada outlines as one of its recommendations for actions at the school level, to see schools as an excellent place to promote mental health (Mental Health Commission Canada, 2013). By doing so, we must also recognize the advantage of partnerships between schools and communities, coalitions and networks, all working together while affiliating, together in a plural sense, to move forward. With the Covid-19 pandemic, the world is faced with opportunities to evolve from stigma associated with the talk around mental health. With increased collaboration and inclusive partnerships, we can work with the diversity that is already prevalent in our societies, while giving agency to all members of the community. Furthermore, with action, reflection, and anticipation, we can create space for co-agency among peers, teachers, parents, and communities.

The Thing from the Future

Looking beyond the 2030 Agenda, and with UNESCO's Futures of Education 2050 and beyond, we look to the future as an object, an object of anticipations and futures thinking where we ask the questions "What do we want to become?" (UNESCO, 2020) and "How do we want to get there?". Policy actions today can affect the advancement of education tomorrow. As we are living through a global crisis, we are swept by the gaps, inequalities and vulnerabilities

present in society today. Nonetheless, at the core is the ability of humans to act, and to act now for a better tomorrow. The ability and potential of the public lead to the agency and advocacy that we may need to build a better futures model, with human resourcefulness as a key component. Within human resourcefulness lies the sense of *Belonging, Affiliating and Plurality*. When conceptualizing this into a framework, we can use the ‘Thing from the Future’ (Candy & Watson, 2014) to build on this vision.

The ‘Thing from the Future’ comprises of an ATOM – Arc, Terrain, Object, Mood. Based on the work by Stuart Candy and Situation Lab, this foresight tool can be used to describe objects from a range of alternative futures. Using this as a foresight tool, the concept of School as a Meeting Place can be seen as a thing from the future, a strategic implementation of a paradigm shift; with the Arc- the trajectory of the Thing, the Terrain- the thematic context or location where this object could be found in the future, the Object- the product and focus of the imagination, and the Mood- suggesting how it might feel to experience this Thing from the future.

Working through the ATOM to bring about change and School as a Meeting Place as a Thing from the Future, the ARC would be initiatives of growth, collapse, discipline and transformation that have already emerged in schools and educational contexts, which promote valuing diversity and building on the resources we have. Examples of such initiatives valuing language, heritage and culture, are UNESCO’s Mother-Tongue Based Multi-lingual Education, and International Mother Language Day, research on plurilingual and pluricultural education, initiatives to promote and sustain the development of intercultural awareness and intercultural pedagogy, such as teaching for cross-lingual transfer (Cummins, 2005), and reconciling between majority and minoritized language users (Lory & Prasad, 2019), among many others.

The TERRAIN should reflect a *glocal* context – global yet local, a simultaneous occurrence of universalizing education to answer the needs of globalization and the effects it has on social, political and economic systems. Policy makers around the world can adapt an inclusive and diversity-valuing approach in all and any educational contexts, in every corner of the global world. The OBJECT would be of course schools as meeting places, where young minds come to learn, but to also learn from each other, with the goal of learning to become. Entering schools with the trajectories and repertoires that we carry, and leaving schools with the sense of community, is a product we aspire to see. The building and sustaining of community is critical to meet the needs of society, where we grow and learn together and from each other. Lastly, the MOOD would be seen as a feeling of harmony, with empathy placed at the core, along with a sense of self awareness and awareness of others, a place for human agency and its scope, the provision of autonomy and empowerment, regeneration and humanization, diversity, equity and inclusion at the forefront, addressing issues and questions of identity, meaning and purpose, increasing trust in scholarship, staying connected in a world after a global pandemic, and seeing diversity as a resource to reach that (mood). The sense to be evoked would be of Belonging, Affiliating and Plurality.

A forward-thinking vision

Adapting a paradigm shift and a change in world view comes with its own challenges. As we grow more and more into a world where we as humans rely on technological and scientific innovations and advances, we move further away from the reliance and value placed on human and social interactions, something that has profoundly emerged from recent outcomes of the covid-19 global pandemic. Imagining and re-imagining a world post pandemic, addressing the complexities and uncertainties, while reflecting upon what implications are anticipated for

visions of foresight, what challenges do we foresee and how can we create and enable policy-making with the aim to strengthen global solidarity, are all questions and concerns linked to shaping a forward-thinking vision for a future where we can take action, make informed choices and act on our agency to lead and to plan, anticipate, and create. Reflecting on the past, as well as the current or the ‘now’, and thinking about the future, the tomorrow, the 2030, 2050 and beyond, there are many global foresight challenges that come with anticipating the futures of the world, however, we must not forget the well-being of humanity, the well-being of citizens of our global world.

We live in a plural reality, when planning, for the future we should also think about the plurality of our societies, of our make up and of our schools. UNESCO also conceptualizes the future in a plural sense- the Futures of Education- enabling us to recognize the diversity in knowing and being around the world- a process of Affiliating. The plural form also establishes the multiple standpoints of individuals who make up this world- the sense of Belonging. Looking at the future as an object that is plural in dimension, allows us to explore a multiplicity of what is to come, one that we can co-construct, in our shared space, the world.

Nelson Mandela once said, “*Education is the most powerful weapon which you can use to change the world*” and UNESCO states in their initiative for the Futures of Education, “*Knowledge and learning are at the core of transformations in human minds and societies*” (UNESCO, 2019). Education as we know, is transformative. Education holds the power to change, to transgress, to create and pave pathways for learners to become. What could be a better construct for the futures of education, than school as a meeting place?

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