



Renewing the social contract for education: A personal point of view on the UNESCO report

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Abstract Having contributed to the UNESCO report *Reimagining our futures together: A new social contract for education* as a member of the International Commission and as Chair of the research-drafting committee of this commission, the author now takes the liberty of making some personal notes on the reflections advanced therein. This brief article is divided into three sections. The first presents the main foundations of the social contract of educational modernity (nineteenth century). The second discusses how this contract has to be renewed today. The third advocates the need to value the common in education, based on five main ideas: cooperation (in pedagogy), convergence (in curriculum), collaboration (in teaching), conviviality (in schools), and capillarity (in society). Finally, the epilogue defends the urgency of placing human rights at the center of the process of renewing the social contract for education.

Keywords Common · Convergence curriculum · Educational capillarity · Pedagogy of cooperation · School conviviality · Social contract for education · Teacher collaboration

As a member of the International Commission on the Futures of Education, I would like to offer my personal perspective on the aims and ambitions of the report *Reimagining our futures together: A new social contract for education* (UNESCO, 2021). I do not intend to present a summary of the document, but rather to position myself in the face of the dilemmas and challenges it raises.

The central axis of the article is the renewal of the social contract for education, a contract that was established in the nineteenth century around compulsory schooling and a school model that has held up well until recently, but which needs to be rethought in light of the educational challenges of today. It is not a question of starting from scratch, as is often the case in speeches proclaiming the end of the school and its obsolete nature, but

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rather of starting over, preserving the best features of the school, and courageously transforming them.

It is necessary to resist the erosion of the school and to affirm its value as a public and common good. In this sense, we must be wary of some futuristic daydreams that seek to create a new educational reality without schools. But it is also necessary to resist some movements, which have become stronger in recent years, that present a romanticized view of the school, ignoring its difficulties and failures, especially in ensuring opportunities for all.

Thus, in the first section, I explain the main factors that have defined the social contract of modernity in the field of education in a rather rough description (the concept of modernity is not mobilized in the perspective of the historical period after the Middle Ages, but in the sense of the “second modernity”, that is, the social transformations that took place after the end of the eighteenth century).

In the second section, I take up these factors again in order to defend the need for their renewal today. Finally, in the last section, I attempt to give content to this renewal, based on an interpretation of the five chapters of the central part of the UNESCO report on the futures of education. The article concludes with a brief epilogue defending the need to go beyond national citizenship and to renew the social contract for education based on a commitment to human rights, not only as they were formulated in 1948, but also as they are today: an indispensable condition for building a common humanity.

The social contract of modernity

At the end of the nineteenth century, a long historical process of nation-building and scientific modernity produced a social contract for education that allowed the production and global dissemination of the “school model” (or school form, or school grammar, or school regime). By “contract” we mean a social agreement between citizens and the state that defines rights and obligations in the field of education and that allows not only the development of national education systems but also the consolidation of a specific school order and structure.

By adopting the concept of the “social contract”, we are obviously referring to Jean-Jacques Rousseau, not forgetting that his work *Du contrat social* was published in 1762, the same year as *Émile ou de l'éducation*. For Rousseau, the social contract is both a pact and a contract; it is an instituting political act through which a community is formed that establishes for itself laws, norms, and practices (Bernardi, 2001). In this sense, more than the elaboration made by social contract theorists, we are interested in linking the idea of the social contract to the process of institutionalization as defined by Michel Foucault: the creation of specific “regimes of truth”, that is, sets of beliefs, discourses, and practices that are accepted as true and legitimate at a given historical moment (Foucault, 1994). It is on the basis of these “regimes” that a certain consensus is built and a certain way of educating children is established.

I will argue that in the nineteenth century, this social contract is organized around three main elements.

The first is the intervention of the state, primarily through the imposition of compulsory schooling for children. Education plays a central role in the formation of national citizenship, as Pierre Bourdieu explains: “The creation of the national society goes hand in hand with the affirmation of universal educability: since all individuals are equal before the law, the state

must make them citizens, endowed with the cultural means to actively exercise their civil rights” (1993, p. 54).

The second axis is the definition of a specific space-time for education. The school building, relatively isolated from the social environment, is designed around the “classroom” cell. In his famous work on school architecture, Henry Barnard argues for new school buildings as a service to the bodies and souls of children, noting that “in regard to accommodation, the convicts of the State Prisons are better provided for than the dear children of New England” (1850, p. 37).

The third axis involves the generalization of a “school model” with the classroom as its epicenter, clearly defining the roles of teachers and pupils, the pedagogy of the class, the curriculum, and a certain “mechanics of school organization” which, according to John Dewey, governs the whole system: “No matter what the accepted precept or theory may be ... the reality of education is found in the personal and face-to-face contact of teacher and child. The conditions that underlie and regulate this contact dominate the educational situation” (1902, p. 23).

This contract has played a decisive historical role, particularly in the fight against child labor and the identification and preservation of other human rights, and is still a valid framework for invoking the responsibilities for states’ and citizens’ full participation in education. Unfortunately, it is far from being fully respected, especially with regard to “quality education for all”, as the Agenda 2030 education indicators show.

The school is a remarkable invention because it creates a common space-time distinct from the rest of society and the family. There are opportunities and rhythms of education that can only take place at school. The work of the teacher is irreplaceable, also in the transmission of knowledge, through a unique intergenerational relationship.

It is therefore essential to protect schools and teachers from “futuristic” trends that proclaim their obsolescence and propose their displacement into private environments, such as the home, and by individualized devices, especially digital ones.

The hollowing out of the public sphere and the weakening of public institutions overlap with the rise of the “global education industry” (Verger, Lubienski, & Steiner-Khamsi, 2016). These factors create a vacuum that industry players fill, eroding the public and shared character of education.

The first condition for thinking about the future of education is to criticize these trends, which are fueled by an exaggerated discourse on learning—what Gert Biesta calls “learnification” (2021)—and the trivialization of the principle of “ubiquitous learning”. Philippe Meirieu is right to say that it is necessary to “resist” the erosion of the school as a public and democratic space, and for that it is necessary to have the courage to change: “We will not overcome the difficulties we are experiencing with simple cosmetic adjustments. Like every era in our history, it requires builders” (2007, p. 121).

It is essential to resist trends that jeopardize the essential value of school and, above all, the public dimension of education. At the same time, however, there is an urgent need to recognize the limits of the current social contract for education and to work towards its renewal (Nóvoa & Alvim, 2020). In a sense, it is not so much a question of building a new social contract for education, but of renewing the current one. The solutions we seek for the future of education lie in a dual approach: *conserving* and *transforming*.

Renewing the social contract for education

As Olivier Reboul has eloquently stated, schools exist to enable individuals “to be free and not to be alone” (1980, p. 113). Education goes beyond mere academic knowledge; it involves the shared experience of working together in a public space, fostering human relationships marked by unexpected experiences, inquiries, and emotions. It is a profound encounter between teachers and students, mediated by knowledge and culture. Preserving this presence and interaction is essential, as it is the foundation of education and its potential for growth.

Education is the antithesis of “separation”; it is about bringing different people together in the same space, fostering collaboration and the ability to work collectively. Education is inherently based on relationships with others, underscoring the importance of protecting schools as central institutions for the future. The renewal of the social contract for education should be based on these principles.

Allow me to review the three main axes of the modern social contract: the state’s intervention by imposing compulsory schooling in the context of the formation of national citizenship, the definition of a specific space-time for education, and the generalization of a “school model”.

First is the importance of increased citizen participation alongside the role of the state. The creation of a broader public space for education beyond traditional school boundaries becomes essential. Recognizing education as a public and common good allows for greater presence and shared responsibility.

In today’s reality of increased life expectancy in many parts of the world, multiple generations coexist and the focus of education extends beyond children to people of all ages. The intergenerational dimension of education, involving not only two generations (children and parents) as in the past, but several generations (children, parents, grandparents, great-grandparents...), is crucial for renewing the social contract for education.

In addition, education should not only encompass national citizenship, but should also be based on human rights principles. This approach includes fulfilling the rights outlined in the 1948 Declaration and recognizing new rights related to climate justice, universal digital access, respect for diverse cultures and forms of knowledge, mobilities and migrations, the dignity of work, and the challenges of the “demographic revolution”.

Second, we need to invent and build new educational environments that, without denying the importance of the classroom, open up different perspectives and opportunities inside and outside the school. The school building is not a mere “container” insofar as it defines pedagogical possibilities and impossibilities.

This is not a merely architectural question, but the elaboration of new frameworks with a strong connection to the external public space. The definition of new environments inside the school space and its connection to the city or wider society is a central element in the renewal of the social contract for education.

The way Paulo Freire presents the idea of the educative city deserves attention: “The City becomes educative through the necessity of educating, learning, teaching, knowing, creating, dreaming, and imagining that all of us—men and women—who occupy its fields, mountains, valleys, rivers, streets, plazas, fountains, houses, buildings, leave on everything the stamp of a certain time and style, the taste of a certain epoch. The City is culture that is created not only by what we do in it and with it, but also the aesthetic look we add to it. The City is us and we are the City” (1998, p. 27).

The third element of the renewal of the social contract for education relates directly to pedagogical issues. The school model has been defined primarily on the basis of the teacher's classes, assigning to the students the role of listeners, not necessarily passive, but strongly dependent on the teacher's lessons.

The importance of this dimension cannot be denied, but school life today must be organized primarily around educational "work". About a century ago, the French philosopher Alain wrote a timely provocation: "I usually think of the classroom as a place where the teacher works little and the child works a lot. Not those lessons that fall like rain and to which the child listens with folded arms. More children reading, writing, calculating, drawing, reciting, copying and recopying" (1932, p. 86).

Yes, what counts today is the work of the students: reading, writing, researching, studying alone, studying with others, being accompanied by teachers, carrying out projects, solving problems, developing themes... In the pedagogical field, this is the meaning of the renewal of the social contract for education.

Valuing the "common" in education

On the basis of education as a public and common good, the renewal of the social contract has concrete consequences for the different levels of school life. Thus, in the central part of the UNESCO report *Reimagining our futures together: A new social contract for education*, there are five chapters devoted respectively to pedagogy, curriculum, teachers, schools, and society.

A personal reading of these chapters reveals that they unfold the concept of the "common" in five principles: cooperation, convergence, collaboration, conviviality, and capillarity.

Pedagogy of cooperation. The conventional school model is largely based on teacher-led classes. This emphasizes the value of the intergenerational relationship between teachers and students. No one explained this better than George Steiner in one of his greatest works, *Lessons of the Masters* (2005). At the same time, however, it is overlooked that education also unfolds among students within the same generation of peers. It is true that in the course of the twentieth century various tendencies emphasized the importance of "cooperative pedagogy", but they were never able to take root in the daily life of schools. There is evidence that early childhood education has been strongly influenced by cooperative principles, but this tends to dissipate in later years. Today, the centrality of "work" gives a new meaning to cooperation as a structuring axis of pedagogy and school life.

Convergence curriculum. The curriculum should be conceived not only as a "course of knowledge", but also as a "course for students", allowing paths and choices that are impossible in a uniform school model. This differentiation must open possibilities, not push students into dead ends. An education that limits itself to reproducing the inequalities of birth is a fraud. The contents of disciplines are important, but what really counts are the different forms of literacy—alphabetic, mathematical, scientific, and artistic among them—that is, the mastery of the instruments of knowledge and culture. We cannot ignore recent developments in science, namely the "convergence revolution" (MIT, 2011), nor fail to value "knowledge commons" in the curriculum.

Teacher collaboration. Teachers trained in the new normal schools have been one of the structuring elements of the social contract of educational modernity since the mid-nineteenth century. Their work was defined individually, inside the classroom. Given the structure of the school model, many calls for collaboration were perceived by teachers as

“contrived collegiality” (Hargreaves, 1994). Today, the creation of new educational environments, more open and plural, in which groups of students work with several teachers at the same time, makes teaching collaboration indispensable. The teaching profession is trending towards a more collective identity, with major implications for teacher education and the daily life of teachers.

School conviviality. School is not only a service, but above all an institution that builds us as a society, opens us to the world and to others, expands the freedom of students, and allows each person to build a future that they would never have reached staying at home. The recent trend to isolate education to the “home” or other private spaces through technology-mediated distance learning is a major setback for a humanist vision that seeks to educate everyone with everyone. Schools are one of the few institutions where it is still possible to try to build a life together. Schools are places of citizenship and conviviality. Learning and studying together is the best way to promote a “convivial society”, a common humanity.

Educational capillarity. The social contract of modernity imposed a “school model” that brought almost everything into the school. The renewal of the social contract must recognize the importance of educational capillarity, that is, educational processes that exist in many parts of society, not just in school. We are facing a radically new reality that will transform schools and the way they are inhabited by students and teachers. This public space cannot be merely a place for listening and must be grounded on citizenship rights, a space of participation where decisions about education can be made collectively.

These five principles are based on the idea of the “common”. The school is an institution with potential to defend and promote human rights, and fight against authoritarianism and the fragmentation of societies.

The importance of bonds, ties, and interconnections has taken on an unexpected dimension today and is part of a new planetary consciousness. The ties that bind us also set us free. This work must be done in schools and by teachers, in the perspective of Pierre Dardot and Christian Laval in their essay on the revolution of the twenty-first century: “there are no common goods, there are only commons to be institutionalized, or commons to be made common” (2019, p. 407).

It is this effort to “institute the common” that best characterizes a renewed social contract for education.

Epilogue

The social contract of modernity is extraordinary—with the imposition of compulsory education, the public school, and the construction of a “school model” that has endured well to this day. But this contract has not fulfilled many of its promises, such as reaching all children and including them all in a collaborative school culture. It must therefore be renewed and reinvented, with an education open to all generations, with the strengthening of the school as a space of democracy and conviviality, and with a pedagogy organized around the work of the students.

In the coming years, much of the future of education will be decided. We cannot remain indifferent and thus contribute to the abandonment of a public and common vision and the triumph of individualistic and consumerist perspectives. It is not only the future of the school that is at stake but the future of our common humanity. Never before has there been such an urgent need for education to contribute to the democratization of societies, to the reduction of inequalities in access to knowledge and culture, to the construction of

participatory forms of deliberation: to decide is not only to choose, it is also generating the obligation to act and to respect the decision taken collectively in the name of common interest. The school must be a space of freedom where one learns to value the common.

French philosopher Bruno Latour's last book is based on a rereading of Kafka's *Metamorphosis*: we are all engendered and mortal bodies that owe our conditions of habitability to other engendered and mortal bodies of all sizes and shapes (2021, p. 127). It is a beautiful way of thinking about the common in education. We all depend on each other. When we teach this across generations, we are making the most beautiful gesture for the future of humanity.

Anyone who believes in the transformative power of education knows that in order to live up to that "power", education must transform itself. We are witnessing the end of a historical cycle, the end of a particular "school model", but not the end of schooling, for it is being reinvented and reimagined every day, in many places, taking on new qualities.

The most important position of the UNESCO report *Reimagining our futures together: A new social contract for education* is that it is an "invitation", not a report in the traditional sense. An invitation to reflect and act together. Collaboration. *Co-labor-ation*: action through common labor.

To say this, which seems little, is to say a lot. The transformation of education will not come from a new reform, nor from a new method, nor from a new technology, but from the ability to think and act together. There are no ready-made solutions. There are doubts and questions. The future is not what is about to happen, but what already exists in thousands and thousands of experiences around the world. That's why UNESCO's report on the futures of education ends with an invitation to dialogue and exchange among educators around the world.

It is worth going back to Edgar Morin (2010) in his text on metamorphosis. The French philosopher was referring to climate issues, but we can appropriate his thought for education when he writes that there are already thousands of experiences around the world, many extraordinary ones, but that these experiences do not know each other, do not inspire each other, and they are not yet able to build a movement of transformation.

What is true for climate issues is true for education issues. The best we can do is to identify, name, know, study, share, and make visible what is already being done in the world, in order to strengthen education as a public and common good. State action is central, but it is in these educational movements to reinforce participation and citizenship that the key to combating the erosion of the public sphere and mitigating the growing influence of the "global education industry" can be found. It is from these multiple energies and presences that we can imagine the renewal of the social contract for education.

When he received the Nobel Prize in 1998, on the day of the 50th anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, José Saramago reminded us of the symmetry between rights and duties. Now, in 2023, as we celebrate the 75th anniversary of the same declaration, let us remember that education is everyone's right and, for that very reason, everyone's obligation. Human rights are at the heart of the renewal of the social contract for education.

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