



Education as a Social System: Present and Future Challenges

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Abstract

Education is usually considered as one of the most important social institutions. Since it builds the present and the future of each and every society, all the other institutions such as, family, politics, health, religion and economics would be meaningless and incomplete without it. As being the foremost instrument and power for creating the preferred and desired future, it is anticipated that this power should be able to raise better generations to bring the desired dreams to come true. Hence, each society has its own changing socio – cultural / economic needs and requires an education to meet these needs. These needs should be met both deliberately and cautiously since they will shape both the present and the future of the society. This article aims to highlight the relationship between the education and the social system and point out some critical issues and challenges.

Keywords: *Educational Reform, Social Systems, Education, Challenges,*

Education and Social System Relationship

When confronted with any kind of societal problem, education is usually seen one of the primary instruments to contribute to the solution all over the world. Therefore, many educational reforms, changes and innovation initiatives are prepared, introduced and implemented in almost every country.

Each and every society has its own changing socio – cultural/economic needs and requires an education to meet these needs. These needs should be met both deliberately and cautiously since they will shape both the present and the future of the society. It is clear that society would be in a state of complete turmoil without a quality education. As a consequence, the quality of education that a society's members receive influences the quality of the society in which they live.

We generally forget that the education system is much broader than the simple school system. It includes the best efforts of families, religious institutions, preschools, sport leagues, service groups, educators, media, etc. If the purpose of schooling is to help the next generation of citizens into being, then all of the other institutions should have a role to play. And keeping all these players informed and active should be the purpose of our multiple accountability systems.

Education systems, mainly formal, from pre-school to higher education face social, cultural, environmental, technical, and political challenges, as well as other developments at both local and global level. Countries should be able to react properly to these challenges and prepare generations ready to both

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survive with these challenges and come up with solution(s). Some of the important challenges will be discussed in the following section.

Challenges, Goal and the Role of Education

Historically, the purpose of education is to "encourage responsible citizenship" ([United Nations, 1989](#)). Therefore, the goal should be to produce a better educated and more responsible generation than the previous one.

According to the UN's scenario, it is projected that there will be 11.2 billion of us by 2100 ([BBC](#)). The increase in number causes a serious economic problem. That is, the more we get the more the income gap increases. This gap between rich and poor has always been there but it has never mattered more. It's estimated that the top 1% of the world's richest people owns 450% of the planet's wealth ([inequality.org](#)). Therefore, solving this level of inequality is often considered as an important challenge both for today and for the future. However, it should be noted that income disparity may not be responsible alone for the problem. The issue is not the existence of a gap between rich and poor, but the existence of unfairness. That is, where some people get an extra preferred treat others are just treated unjustly. Therefore, both poverty and unfairness set the fundamentals of many challenges in the 21st Century. How could these challenges be solved for the good of the citizens?

There are three significant criteria to be paid attention to so as to manage these challenges. First of all, it is important that people get equal opportunity in society, regardless of their background, race, sexuality, gender, and ethnicity and so on, secondly, rewards should be distributed fairly based on integrity and thirdly, people should get equal outcomes without considering the circumstances ([ILO.org](#)).

Education systems both in Turkey and elsewhere changed significantly in last few decades and will continue changing enormously over the next 10-20 years as a result of global changes in every area of life including the needs of students and the societies they will live in. And this future poses major challenges for us today. We should be able to connect the various elements of the system to ensure that it provides educational pathways for all and it is hoped that remarks made in the article will bring some insights into future education reforms and systems.

Education systems should be able to contribute to a creating a more equal, inclusive and socially just world ([UNESCO, 2017](#)). Unfortunately, the recent education reforms in most countries from the US to Turkey are part of a larger and pre-planned effort by some international organizations, corporate and political ideology to transform the nature of society by abrogating the social democratic policies.

Politicians, business chambers, journalists pejoratively label government schools as monopoly and claim that they must be eliminated and the entire educational system from pre-school to university must be privatized. And honestly, the main tool of this movement is centrally made both national and international high-stakes tests.

When recent educational reforms are analyzed carefully we notice that they are usually based on three areas: high-stakes testing, accountability and privatization. And these initiatives are generally introduced by business organizations and political leaders to transform government's role in society. There is clear evidence on the relationship between the present education policies and the interest of capital. This relationship links to the ideology of inequality, social efficiency and neo-liberalism. Therefore, it is not surprising to admit that the recent education reforms we have witnessed cannot be understood without understanding neo-liberal philosophy. Neo-liberal political theory increasingly influences education policies. Recent reforms systematically transform curricula, pedagogy, and assessment as a whole.

Neo-liberalism provides the principles for reforming school curriculum and pedagogy concentrating on teaching students the skills and knowledge they need to be productive workers in workplaces ([Bhopal and Shain, 2016](#)). Therefore, STEM and coding movements should also be analyzed from this perspective! Neo-liberalism replaces community common sense and thought over what we desire from society and our institutions with decisions made through the market.

The kind of school we require should not hold a perfect ideal where all learners set to the same goal at the same time and with same pace and pattern. In fact they should infuse the idea that quality schools are places increasing the variance in students' performances and at the same time raise the mean. We have to be more different instead of more alike. And the way to achieve this vision is via a system where individual differences are nurtured equally and assessment is done alternatively instead of centrally made high stake testing as the main determinant.

Education could contribute to creating a more socially just and inclusive society. If we really want to create a truly democratic system of education, we should open many entryways of opportunity for our children where they can fulfill their visions creatively. These entryways should lead into all the areas of human life and learning from zoology to anthropology, from education to archeology and not only the areas pressed, infused and dictated by corporate powers as it is the case in STEM or coding nowadays in Turkey and worldwide. The increased global integration of the capitalist economy in past two decades has created networks and circulations of capital that reach across international borders with new intensity, speed and aim ([OECD, PISA, TIMSS](#)).

We should have enough faith in human kind to believe that an approach based on student interests and aptitudes will also take care of the both present and future needs of the society. For Dewey ([1987](#)), Schools were essential to developing the “democratic habits of thought and action” necessary for effective participation in the democratic process (p.225). And in order to improve themselves and the society, individuals need to deliberate with one another and practice habits of “open-mindedness, tolerance of diversity, fairness, compassion, rational understanding, empathy, respect for truth and critical judgment ([Olsen, Codd & O'Neill, 2004](#)).

Current education reforms threaten not only teaching and learning but also the future of public schools and relatedly the whole society (Teacher evaluation by students, parents, school principals etc.). Inconsistent findings, overlooked evidence of bias, allowing the people to game could be just a few shortcomings of such a system. I am not against to accountability. However, a system designed to control, punish and reward via controlling and threatening has nothing to do with accountability.

The real crisis in education is the increasing unwillingness of politicians and the public to realize that markets and privatization are not the solution, but rather the problem themselves. Instead, we need to envision creating a society where everyone gets a quality education starting from kindergarten to the university and beyond and making their own dreams to come true.

When we look at some of the other cited challenges to be taken into consideration we come up with a list including of artificial intelligence, global development, health and humanity, energy, future of internet and media, democracy, terrorism, racism, white supremacy, creativity, environment and world security, immigration, sustainability, international/global problems, individualism, aging, generation gap, polarizations, authority, ethics, poverty, scarcity/abundance, gene editing, chemical & biological weapons, eugenics, producing artificial human organs, personality & privacy, producing bigger and more powerful weapons & technological products for consumers. Let me touch some of these challenges in light with education.

Artificial intelligence is one of the most important challenges we will face in the 21st century. Robotic systems including driverless cars, drones, surgical and manufacturing robots will be part of our daily lives. How will we be able to endorse these systems as safe, human friendly and ethical? How will we be able to get rid of our uncertainties about such systems? How will we be able to cope with replacing such systems with human force? How will we be able to solve unemployment problem? The more we let computers to take over human reasoning the more we are faced with losing our human side and thinking. What are the things that make us human? For example, ethics, morality, conscience, compassion, wholeheartedness, creativity, irrational originality, craziness etc. Could computers and robots have these qualities and use them like human beings? What happens if the computers fail?

One of the main constraints today and future is how we move around our cities. Will education systems be able to produce such architects, civil engineers, urban planners or city developers to create cities where we can live peacefully and safely? Without the design of places to support a social dimension, cities will not thrive regardless of how much technology we attempt to integrate, design for, and adopt. Immigration and refugee issues also adds another important dimension this issue and make it one of the biggest challenges of the 21st century.

Social, environmental and behavioral factors have tremendous impact that on our health overall. The challenge is how best we can engage the public with fundamental scientific advances that really can positively impact human life and the world we live in. Recent advances in gene editing, robotics, information and nanotechnology open a whole different world for human beings. Gene editing, especially promise a future in which human genomes can be corrected and upgraded. It seems obvious that by using tools like CRISPR, traits such as intelligence and lifespan could be rewritten. We must be sure that CRISPR technology is not abused. Therefore, we must continue to discuss and consider the profound societal and ethical impacts of CRISPR technology. Will we be able to educate scientists and to use such technology safely, ethically and responsibly?

For example, recent outbreaks like Mad Cow Disease, Avian (Bird Flu) Influenza, SARS, Ebola, and Zika have all shown how unprepared the world is to deal with epidemics. Such epidemics require serious preparation, and we must do more to be ready for them. Have you ever thought how and why we get all these epidemics suddenly and usually in just one part of the world? As technological and innovative advancements progressively create social change, how can democratic societies enable ordinary individuals to have a say in the choices that shape the innovative trajectories that will thus figure out what the future resembles?

We all know but generally forget that the Earth is finite and this fact has and will have tremendous implications physically, economically, socially, and politically. Sustainability became one of the buzz words of the present time. In any case, it is generally not well understood and by and large is misused, yet actually the fact is that any activity that is not sustainable and reasonable will end soon. So we should urgently plan for the time when humankind can live utilizing just new generation renewable resources, while keeping up the biodiversity that makes the planet more tenable and habitable. In fact, sustainability should be the ultimate environmental issue, the ultimate health issue, and the ultimate human rights issue. Another major challenge related to this topic is the 'water security' which will be caused due to heavy urbanization. The battle for sustainable development will be won or lost in cities. 150 million people are moving to cities each year. By 2050, over 7 billion people will live in cities (80% of the world), and cities will be responsible for 75% of global carbon emissions (UN). How will education systems educate responsible citizens, grow political leaders, and create entrepreneurs, engineers to focus on energy issue and develop renewable energy sources and lead nations to use them effectively and efficiently.

Google was built on providing people with high-quality and authoritative results for their search queries. It gives users a breadth of diverse content from variety of sources with the principle of a free and open web. However, non-authoritative information ranks too high in Google search results and this leads us to more high quality, credible content on the web. Internet became a source of fraud news! Education should be able to educate individuals to use internet responsibly, effectively and ethically. Recent developments and media reports show that we are far behind this vision and therefore media literacy courses started in many programs all over the world.

Terrorism is rising as a result of the availability of weapons of mass destruction that are becoming increasingly less expensive and easier to access. And unfortunately, some developed and heavy weapon producing countries are both supporting and creating terrorist organizations. It is vital to deal with the reasons why people want to become terrorists and to achieve cooperation among potentially hostile cultures. And why some developed countries support these groups? Education systems again should be able to educate people for diversity, tolerance and great understanding in order to live in peace.

We will need creative individuals in all areas since the technology will lead to an era of extreme creativity. Exciting jobs will develop and rich countries will help young people around the planet to become entrepreneurs. Therefore cultivating the entrepreneurial mind set should be basic element of education systems. One of the important goals of the 21st century should be to develop the capability inherent in everybody by exploiting powerful technologies that accelerate learning potential. There seems to be a serious gap between our skills and our wisdom. Science and technology are accelerating furiously, but wisdom is not. The skill-wisdom gap is enlarged because skills offer the ways to get wealthy. How about morality? Creativity and innovation should definitely be carried out with social responsibility and humanity in mind.

Conclusions

The push for economic growth and development in recent few decades has prompted significant increase in wealth for large numbers of people across the globe. In any case, notwithstanding immense gains in worldwide economic growth and development, there is clear proof that our present social, political and financial frameworks are creating imbalances instead of decreasing them. As a result of this inequality, the globe has been facing some new forms of financial crisis which showed significant weaknesses in the financial system and some of the burdens that can result from having even such an interwoven global market. The world economy is now struggling with slow growth, unconventional monetary policy in major economies, and strained and tailored government budgets. It is important that we must find ways of making the financial system more resilient and able to resist shocks in the market in for a more just and equal world. The crises in many countries inevitably caused a significant drop in levels of public trust and confidence in financial institutions. Therefore, the system needs to re-establish that trust in order to function effectively ([Breene, 2016](#)).

Our educational experiences should provide us with the information and tools to understand what are happening around the world, how it affects our lives, the lives of others and the planet itself. We should be taught how we, as ordinary people, could live our lives and actively participate in creating a safer, happier, civilized, more humane and a sustainable world ([Stansberry, K., et al.](#)).

Education should be able to prepare individuals for ethical decision-making and ethical leadership for the above challenges. Therefore, the present conflict between education for social responsibility and education for jobs should be ended for the sake of a better future. Teachers should be prepared to help their students develop the global consciousness needed to support human rights and ecological sustainability.

Will the education we give be able to raise citizens to create a just, democratic and better society? How will our students be prepared to make decisions on the above topics? How will they play their roles in future? What ethical values will shape their decisions? Who will teach and where will they teach these values? Whose values will they be? Is there consensus over these values? Do we have the right strategies for working toward consensus? Will the education help us to understand the purpose of life? Will the education we provide help children to survive and fulfill their sense of self? Will the education provide individuals to have a better quality life both for themselves and others? Will the education system help individuals to realize their potentials and chase their dreams? And finally, will the education help individuals to love and live wholeheartedly?

I honestly have no intention to attack on teachers, schools, and governments, whatsoever, rather I am in an effort to help them to re-examine both the global and national political pressures on schools, teachers and education system in general which narrowly focus on preparing students for the workforce they have in their minds rather than for broader citizenship and social responsibility purposes for the good of humanity.

The educational challenge facing Turkey and many other nations worldwide is not that schools are not doing jobs well rather schools are not helping the majority of young people reach levels of skill and competence to live a decent life supporting a just and civil society that helps them to maintain a sustainable and responsible democratic life.

Will we be able to take the control or will we continue being controlled?

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