RETHINKING THE PURPOSE OF EDUCATION FOR THE CHANGING WORLD: REASSERTING THE HUMANISTIC APPROACH

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ABSTRACT: John Locke has rightly said that the story of civilisation is the story of education. Education is an integral part of human life and there is no more powerful transformative force than education. It is at the heart of our efforts both to adapt to change and to transform the world within which we live. In every era choices about education are determined by choices about the kind of society we wish to live in. Society in present times is undergoing deep transformations characterised by new levels of complexities and contradictions and this calls for rethinking the purpose of education. We have to become more aspirational and inspirational to speak to new times. There is a need to reassert the humanistic approach to education to counter the current turbulent times. We have to go beyond the utilitarian vision and human capital approach that dominates much of the education discourse today. We have to reject learning systems that alienate individuals, dehumanise them and treat them as commodities. Contemporary education needs to be more humanistic and less-instrumental and market-driven. How can this humanistic approach be realised? How should learning be organised? What choices should be made to help learners- 'to know', 'to do', 'to live together', and 'to be'? These are some of the questions which have inspired the ideas presented in this paper.

Keywords: Rethinking, Purpose, Education, Changing World, Humanistic Approach

Introduction- What Triggered the Need for Reasserting this Approach?

The world is getting younger, and aspirations for human rights and dignity are rising. People are more connected than ever, but intolerance and conflict remain rife. New power hubs are emerging, but inequalities are deepening and the planet is under pressure. Opportunities for development are vast, but challenges are steep and complex. The world is changing – education must also change. Societies everywhere are undergoing deep transformations, and this calls for new forms of education to foster the competencies that societies need, today and tomorrow for a peaceful co-existence and sustenance. This means moving beyond literacy and numeracy, to focus on new approaches to learning for greater justice, social equality and global solidarity. Education must be about cultural literacy, on the basis of respect and equal dignity, helping to weave together the various social diversities existing today. A quality education is the necessary foundation for learning in a complex and rapidly changing world both to adapt to change and to transform the world within which we live. We must draw the right lessons to chart a new course forward; we need a new focus on the quality of education and the relevance of learning. There is no more powerful transformative force than education – to promote human rights and dignity, to build a better future for all, founded on equal rights and social justice, respect for cultural diversity, and international solidarity and shared responsibility, all of which are fundamental aspects of our common humanity.

This is why we must think big again and re-vision education in a changing world. For this, we need debate and dialogue– to be both aspirational and inspirational, to speak to new times. This is inspired by a humanistic vision of education and development, based on respect for life and human dignity, equal rights, social justice, cultural diversity, international solidarity, and shared responsibility for a sustainable future. Economic growth and the creation of wealth have reduced global poverty rates, but vulnerability, inequality, exclusion and violence have increased within and across societies throughout the world. While technological development contributes to greater interconnectedness and offers new avenues for exchange, cooperation and solidarity, we also see an increase in cultural and religious intolerance, identity-based political mobilization and conflict. Education must find ways of responding to such challenges, taking into account multiple worldviews. Rethinking the purpose of education and the organization of learning has never been more urgent. The ethical and moral principles of a humanistic approach to development stand against violence, intolerance, discrimination and exclusion. It means going beyond narrow utilitarianism and economism to integrate the multiple dimensions of human existence. It requires an open and flexible approach to learning that is both lifelong and life-wide: an approach that provides the opportunity for all to realize their potential for a life of dignity. We need to reconsider the link between education and societal development.

Meaning- What does this Approach Mean in the Present Day Context?

Humanistic Approach in today's context can be used to designate a variety of educational theories and practices that are committed to the world-view and ethical code of Humanism; i.e., positing the enhancement of human development, well-being, and dignity as the ultimate end of all human thought and action—beyond religious, ideological, or national ideals and values. Based on a long philosophical and moral tradition and manifested in the UN's Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the Rights of the Child—the commitment to Humanism further implies the fostering of the following three fundamental tenets:-

The **first** is philosophical, consisting of a conception of man—men and women—as an autonomous and rational being and a fundamental respect for all humans by virtue of being endowed with freedom of will, rational thinking, moral conscience, empathetic imagination, and creative powers.

The **second** tenet is socio-political, consisting of a universal ethics of human equality, reciprocity, and solidarity and a political order of pluralistic, just and humane democracy. The ultimate commitment is to provide every man and women with the rights and opportunities to participate meaningfully in the cultural, social, and political spheres of life.

The **third** tenet is pedagogical, consisting in the commitment to assist all individuals to realize and perfect their potentialities and to enjoy as fully as possible all the goods that make a human life as good as it can be. The aim of such education was the attainment of full and worthy human life with the possession of culture and civic spirit.

Based on the humanistic stance that people's unique dignity lies in their critical reason, moral sensitivity, creative imagination, autonomous will and unique personality, it is essential for humanistic approach to prioritise the value of human dignity – including freedom of thought, moral autonomy and personal authenticity over any other religious, nationalistic, economic, or ideological set of values. Sustaining and enhancing the dignity, capacity and welfare of the human person in relation to others, and to nature, should be the fundamental purpose of education in the twenty-first century. The humanistic values that should be the foundations and purpose of education include: respect for life and human dignity, equal rights and social justice, cultural and social diversity, and a sense of human solidarity and shared responsibility for our common future. We have to reject learning systems that alienate individuals and treat them as commodities, and of social practices that divide and dehumanize people. It is crucial to educate in such values and principles if we are to achieve sustainability and peace.

By broadening its scope in these ways, education can be transformative and contribute to a sustainable future for all. Based on this ethical foundation, critical thinking, independent judgement, problem-solving, and information and media literacy skills are the keys to developing transformative attitudes. An integrated and humanistic approach to education is all the more relevant in today's world.

Suggestions- How to Bring in this Approach?

Humanity has entered a new phase in its history with increasingly rapid developments in science and technology. These have both utopian and dystopian possibilities. For us to benefit in an emancipatory, just and sustainable way, we must understand and manage the opportunities and the risks. Making this possible should be the fundamental purpose of education and learning in the twenty-first century. How can education respond to the challenges of achieving sustainability? How can a plurality of worldviews be reconciled through a humanistic approach to education? How can such a humanistic approach be realized through educational policies and practices? As we attempt to reconcile the purpose and organisation of education as a collective societal endeavour, the following suggestions may serve as the first steps towards reaffirming the humanistic approach. Some ideas may be:-

Recognition of cultural diversity and rejection of cultural chauvinism- There is growing recognition of cultural diversity, whether historically inherent to nation-states (including linguistic and cultural minorities and indigenous peoples) or resulting from migration. Migration, in particular, is contributing to greater cultural diversity within education systems, the workplace and society generally. Yet we are also witnessing a rise in cultural chauvinism and identity-based political mobilization that present serious challenges to social cohesion throughout the world. While cultural diversity is a source of enrichment, it can also give rise to conflict when social cohesion is under strain. Education should celebrate cultural diversity. Enhanced diversity in education can improve the quality of education by introducing both educators and learners to the diversity of perspectives and the variety of lived worlds.

Fostering responsible citizenship and solidarity in a global world- Education has a crucial role in promoting the knowledge we need to develop: first, a sense of shared destiny with local and national, social, cultural, and political environments, as well as with humanity as a whole; second, an awareness of the challenges posed to the development of communities, through an understanding of the interdependence of patterns of social, economic and environmental change at the local and global levels; and third, a commitment to engage in civic and social action based on a sense of individual responsibility towards communities, at the local, national and global levels.

Encouraging inclusive policy-making- Increased diversity presents challenges for reaching consensus on educational policy options that most directly influence and shape identity. This aspect is perhaps most explicit in the choice of language(s) of instruction and the nature of citizenship education, including the study of history, geography, social studies and religion in multicultural societies. More inclusive processes of consultation on key policy issues are essential to constructive citizenship education in a diverse world.

Rethinking curriculum development- What would a humanistic curriculum look like from the perspective of policy formulation and content? Regarding learning content and methods, a humanistic curriculum is certainly one that raises more questions than it provides answers. It promotes respect for diversity and rejection of all forms of (cultural) hegemony, stereotypes and biases. It is a curriculum based on intercultural education that allows for the plurality of society while ensuring balance between pluralism and universal values. For curriculum frameworks to be legitimate, the process of policy dialogue to define educational goals must be participatory and inclusive. Curriculum policy and content must both be guided by the principles of social and economic justice, equality and environmental responsibility that constitute the pillars of society today.

Countering dominant development discourse- As we address the larger question of the aims and purposes of education and the type of society to which we aspire, we need to consider cultural, social, economic, ethical and civic dimensions. The economic functions of education are undoubtedly important, but we must go beyond the strictly utilitarian vision and the human capital approach that characterizes much of discourse today. Education is not only about the acquisition of skills, it is also about values of respect for life and human dignity required for social harmony in a diverse world. Such an understanding enhances the role of education in developing the capabilities required for people to lead meaningful and dignified lives. An integrated approach based on sound ethical and moral foundations is necessary, therefore, to reassert a humanistic approach to learning for social, economic and cultural development.

Reversing the de-professionalization of teachers- Teachers need to be trained to facilitate learning, to understand diversity, to be inclusive, and to develop competencies for living together and for protecting and improving the environment. They must foster classroom environments that are respectful and secure, encourage self-esteem and autonomy, and use a wide range of pedagogical and didactical strategies. Teachers must relate productively to parents and communities. They need to work in teams with other teachers for the benefit of the school as a whole. Teachers should know their students and their families, and be able to relate teaching to their specific contexts. The missions and careers of teachers must constantly be recast and reconsidered in the light of new requirements and new challenges to education in a constantly changing globalized world. To this end, teacher training at all levels – from the most general to the most specialized – must

better integrate the very essence of the trans-disciplinary spirit: an interdisciplinary approach that can enable our teachers to lead us down the road to creativity and rationality, towards a humanism of shared progress and development, with respect for our common natural and cultural heritage.

Reinterpreting and protecting the four pillars of education- Formal education tends to emphasize certain types of knowledge to the detriment of others that are essential to sustaining human development. Equal attention should be paid, in all organized learning to each of the four pillars:-

Learning to know- a broad general knowledge with the opportunity to work in depth on a small number of subjects.

Learning to do –to acquire not only occupational skills but also the competence to deal with many situations and to work in teams.

Learning to be–to develop one's personality and to be able to act with growing autonomy, judgment and personal responsibility.

Learning to live together– by developing an understanding of other people and an appreciation of inter-dependence.

These four pillars of learning are fundamentally under threat in the context of current societal challenges. The strengthening of ethical principles and values in the process of learning is essential to protecting these pillars of a humanistic approach to education.

Conclusion

A humanistic approach reaffirms a set of universal ethical principles that should be the foundation for an integrated approach to the purpose and organization of education for all. Such an approach has implications for the design of learning processes that promote the acquisition of relevant knowledge and the development of competencies in the service of our common humanity. A humanistic approach takes the debate on education beyond its utilitarian role in economic development. It has a central concern for inclusiveness and for an education that does not exclude and marginalize. It serves as a guide to dealing with the transformation of the global learning landscape to facilitate learning for the sustainable development of all.

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