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The uncertain future of learning: Are we focusing on the right stuff?

Our hosts have invited us to consider how political and economic uncertainties are placing new demands on educational systems around the world. This frame invites us to cluster our enquiry around three levels. First, we might explore the purpose of an education today, “**why?**” Central to this dimension is developing clarity on “for whom?” and “where”. Second, we might review the discovery and innovation that cognitive science provides on the foundation of an educational system that was designed over an hundred years ago, “**how** do we teach and more importantly **how** do we learn?” Finally, our efforts need to consider the specific interventions that we are advancing: e.g., to improve teacher performance, personalize learning and aggregate data to increase accountability. Put simply we might focus on three dimensions: the overall design of our educational systems, the strategies that we are applying and the tactics that support our strategic point of view.

Children growing up in the most vulnerable communities will experience these political and economic uncertainties first, and with the least amount of preparation. The Sustainable Development Goal (#4) invites us to “ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all.” The implication is that vulnerable children should have the same access, equity and quality in their education as children in relatively wealthy communities, a meritorious goal. Equally, does educational design reflect the needs of vulnerable communities or the aspirations of social economies that have achieved a relatively high level of material wealth? Is our support of a seven year old girl in Swaziland to live a full and productive life defined by her dreams and her community’s hopes the same as our efforts to advance liberal democracy in the face of emerging authoritarian regimes which promote nationalist, racist and misogynist principals?

In the face of rapid change and growing unpredictability: climate, global disease, economic volatility – who needs to have agency over education? There are a myriad of stakeholders and institutions that “care”. Governments seeking to perpetuate their power want political support; industries want consumers and workers; communities want to protect their identities and values; parents want their progeny to survive; and what about children – what do they want and need? As we reflect on education’s purpose, each of these constituents has a point of view and there are very few structures where they can come together to consider whether or if the educational system has evolved from our grand-parents time to meet the needs of our children and our grand-children.

Many of us have enormous experience in developing scope and sequence strategies, developing and refining assessments to reinforce existing academic standards and exploring new technologies that are moving us quickly and efficiently toward a pedagogic goal. As we reflect on our purpose, have we thought enough about the learning that does and needs to take place outside of schools, the kind of “skilling” that uncertain times requires and whether the child herself has agency over her education to the degree that these times require? Can we apply our strengths and assets to a different set of questions than the ones we’ve been focused on?

Seven year old Nolwazi in Lumbombo Province in Swaziland wants to play with her friends. The Indian parents of a family from Uttar Pradesh that have migrated to Maharashta want their children to have a better life. The Minister of Education in Kirabati, looking after the needs of 30,000 students, is tasked with preparing a generation to survive the loss of their nation state. Designing an educational system that is relevant to each of these people requires us to revisit the structural design of schools and educational systems with a focus on purpose before we get caught up in strategy and tactics.