

Chapter 1

Reimagining Education: Perspectives From Students, Teachers, and Parents

Mahati Kopparla

University of Calgary, Canada

Aditi Pathak

*UNESCO Mahatma Gandhi Institute of Education for Peace and Sustainable
Development, India*

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

There is general recognition that ‘Education has the power to transform the world’ and equip young people to build a sustainable and peaceful world. As a step towards understanding the current state of education and collectively reimagining the future of education, a series of focus group discussions were conducted with students, teachers, and parents from all over the world. Eight prominent themes emerged from the participant discussion as follows: (1) education as a means to an end, (2) external influences on education system, (3) test centric system of education, (4) constrained curriculum and teaching practices, (5) education as a social and emotional activity, (6) school climate and power dynamics in the classroom, (7) educational infrastructure, and (8) technology and remote learning. Based on participant insights, the major issues in education, emerging innovative solutions, and recommendations for the future are discussed.

DOI: 10.4018/978-1-7998-8310-4.ch001

PROBLEM STATEMENT

Human societies have been marred with several issues of social and economic inequalities and continue to face newer challenges such as climate change and global pandemics. As much needs to be done to address global problems that we face individually, and collectively, there is general recognition that education has the power to transform the world and equip young people to build a sustainable and peaceful world (UNESCO, 2015). Thus, education is identified as a key factor in ensuring human flourishing in the generations to come.

By April 2020, the COVID-19 health crisis had affected more than 1.5 billion school students (UNESCO, 2020). There was disruption in the 'normal' way of being. Interventions such as social distancing impacted education systems with students affected the most. Nearly 90% of learners were unable to attend school with uncertainty on when effective schooling will resume. This statistic along with other global debates on education have renewed impetus to rethinking and reimagining education systems for the future.

While several questions about education today and for the future are worth contemplating, these questions cannot be answered in isolation and require participation and collaboration with the key stakeholders i.e., the students, teachers and the parents. As a step towards understanding and reimagining education, a series of focus group discussions were conducted with key stakeholders in education, i.e., the students, teachers and parents from all over the world. Through a thematic analysis of these focus group discussions, the major issues in education and emerging innovative solutions were identified.

EDUCATION SYSTEMS AND REFORMS

While education systems were present in civilizations around the world from 2000 BC, systems of modern mass education originated in 16th century Europe, and since then have been adapted in various forms world over (Bowen, 2018). During the 19th and 20th century, compulsory education gradually came to be mandated by most governments across the world. In 1948, education was recognized as a basic human right in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) by the United Nations General Assembly. Adapting and morphing with local and global changes through the years, the current education system is intricately situated within the existing socio-cultural, economic and political systems (Ghaffarzadegan, Larson & Hawley, 2017).

With constantly evolving societal needs, the purpose and expectations of receiving an education are often debated (Mayfield, 2019). This process of negotiating the

Reimagining Education

ideals of education and restructuring the different components of the education system to achieve the ideal is broadly referred to as *education reform*. While most education reforms take a top-down approach driven by government policies, some are driven by non-governmental or international organizations, and a few others take a bottom-up approach driven by teachers or parents (Arnové, 2005). However, given the complexity of education systems, reforms face unique challenges during wider implementation (Honig, 2004; Shaked & Schechter, 2019). Based on observations from global educational reforms, Cummings (2010) explained the challenges of implementation:

Even after a seemingly dramatic educational reform, the memory of past ideals and practices will persist to exert influence on the new and even possibly at some later date to replace the new. Thus, educational reform, in its particulars, tends to turn inward reproducing and creating indigenous patterns, rather than outward, converging on internationally celebrated patterns (p.20).

Thus, the implications of reforms are often unfavorable, unforeseen or unintended, with the original vision of educational reform remaining unrealized (Murphy, 2017). While intentional educational reform is usually unsuccessful, changes in the society such as “changes in demographics, in social morals, in labor markets, in views of human rights and capacities, in legal codes, in gender roles – these over times do produce important and lasting changes in what schools do” (Levin, 2004, p.195).

Following decades of partially successful educational reforms, there is general sentiment that modern education systems are failing (Cabrera, 2016). Global education systems are converging towards “increased standardization, a narrowing of the curriculum to focus on core subjects/knowledge, the growth of high stakes accountability and the use of corporate management practices” (Fuller & Stevenson, 2019, p.1). A lack of agency and growing discontentment among educators is leading them to mechanically deliver curriculum while emotionally withdrawing from the education system (Goodson, 2007). Even though the pivotal role of teachers and societal factors in triggering educational change is unmistakable (Priestley & Drew, 2016), the voice of students, teachers, and parents remain unheard in developing educational policies and government reforms (Rentner, Kober, Frizzell & Ferguson, 2016). Education reform can greatly benefit by including the voices of teachers, students and parents that represent the views, opinions, and needs of the ever-changing society.

As a step towards understanding the complex education system and aiding meaningful change, this chapter presents traditionally unheard voices within the education system. Through engagement with students, teachers, and parents across the world, this chapter will systematically synthesize the discussions with stakeholders to:

Reimagining Education

1. Critically examine the existing education system
2. Collectively reimagine a functional and sustainable education system for the future
3. Make recommendations to educators and policy makers to move towards better systems of education.

METHODS

The research study began with an identification of the major themes, based on which the focus group protocol was developed. A series of focus group discussions were conducted with groups of students, teachers, and parents from the five UNESCO regions of the world. The discussions were transcribed and thematically analyzed.

Identification of themes

Under the overarching idea of Reimagining Education, four major themes were identified for the discussion with the stakeholders in line with UNESCO's Futures of Education initiative. Based on the four major themes identified, the research team iteratively prepared a semi-structured discussion protocol. The themes were as follow:

1. **Purpose of Education:** Purpose is defined here as the broader aim, meaning, reason and the end goal of education. This theme focuses on the “why” of education. Participants were encouraged to think about why people go to school or get an education.
2. **Overall experience of learning:** Experience includes any interaction, content, curriculum, pedagogies, knowledge, learning assessments and teaching methodologies that enable the process of learning. This theme focuses on the “what” and “how” of education. Under this theme, participants were given an opportunity to discuss some examples of things they like and dislike about teaching and learning, assessments and use of technology in education.
3. **Spaces of learning:** Spaces of learning could be the classroom, home, the street, the playground, online, or any other place where we learn. This theme focuses on the “where” in education. Under this theme, participants were encouraged to describe the important components of an ideal learning space and talk about what they liked or disliked about their current learning spaces.
4. **Education and Environment:** Environment refers to the natural, social, economic and political setting/surrounding where we live and where education takes place. This theme focuses on the external factors influencing education. Under this theme, participants discussed the relationship between the things learned in school and the environment or society around them.

*Reimagining Education***Focus group discussions**

The focus group discussions (FGD) were conducted in the 5 UNESCO regions (Africa, Arab States, Asia and the Pacific, Europe and North America, Latin America and the Caribbean) with 2 discussions in each region for each stakeholder group. Participants were selected through an open call and were required to submit a short write up to be able to participate in the discussion. The write up was evaluated by the project team and then invited for the discussion. Special attention was given to ensure gender balance and geographical distribution. Participants completed the informed consent and assent process prior to the FGD, informing them of the format of the FDG but not the specific questions. Each discussion consisted of 3-7 participants from the same stakeholder group and lasted for about 1.5 to 2 hours. In total, 32 FGDs were conducted in five regions with about a total of 170 participants (see Table 1). In some cases, discussions had to be cancelled at the last minute due to technical issues, no show, or other unforeseen circumstances. Even though efforts were made to compensate, there was an uneven distribution of groups. The data was collected between August and November 2020. Focus group discussions were transcribed by professionals who adhere to strict policies regarding confidentiality and anonymity.

Table 1. Details of participants included in the focus group discussions

Region	Number of participants		List of Countries
	By group	Total	
North America and Europe	Teachers: 11 Parents: 11 Students: 12	35	Canada, France, Germany, Great Britain, Greece, Mexico, Netherlands, Ukraine, United States of America (9 countries)
Asia and the Pacific	Teachers: 10 Parents: 12 Students: 12	34	Afghanistan, Australia, Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Indonesia, Japan, Kyrgyzstan, Malaysia, Maldives, Philippines, South Korean, Sri Lanka (13 countries)
Africa	Teachers: 8 Parents: 14 Students: 12	34	Botswana, Congo, Ethiopia, Ghana, Kenya, Liberia, Nigeria, South Africa, Tanzania, Uganda, Zambia, Zimbabwe (12 countries)
Latin America and Caribbean	Teachers: 10 Parents: 12 Students: 12	34	Argentina, Belize, Brazil, Chile, Columbia, Jamaica, Venezuela (8 countries)
Middle East	Teachers: 9 Parents: 12 Students: 12	33	Iran, Iraq, Saudi Arabia, Qatar, United Arab Emirates (6 countries)
Total		170	48 countries

Analysis

The data analysis was conducted with a combination of manual coding and machine learning algorithm. Initially, 10 transcripts were coded manually by a team of 3 coders. To establish inter-coder reliability, the first transcript was coded by all 3 coders in the team. Differences in codes were resolved through discussions. The initial set of 10 transcripts was broken down into excerpts and manually coded for inductive and deductive codes. Deductive codes were those that the research team identified ahead of time based on the four major themes - purpose, experience, learning spaces, and environment. Inductive codes were those that emerged from the data transcending the deductive codes such as “need for stakeholder agency”, “connecting with real-life experience”, and “social and emotional experiences”. A machine learning model was trained on the data obtained from these 10 transcripts and was used to make predictions on the next 6 transcripts. These predictions were manually checked for new inductive codes and any coding errors by the machine learning model were rectified. The updated model was then used to code the rest of the transcripts.

Limitations

Education systems are large and complex with millions of students, teachers, administrators, and policy makers. This study composed of 170 participants was a humble effort to understand some global trends in education. While the researchers broadly compare the views and opinions of students, teachers and parents from different regions, the nuances in historical, social and political context of the individuals and associated education system were beyond the scope of this research.

FINDINGS

During the focus group discussion, the participants expressed their opinions on a wide range of issues in education. Through a thematic analysis, eight major themes were identified and each of the themes is discussed in detail along with key insights:

1. Education as a means to an end
2. External influences on education system
3. Test centric system of education
4. Constrained curriculum and teaching practices
5. Education as a social and emotional activity
6. School climate and power dynamics in the classroom

Reimagining Education

7. Educational infrastructure
8. Technology and remote learning.

Education as Means to an End

Attending school or receiving an education was the norm in societies around the world, often enforced by government laws and policies. The stakeholders had a clear vision of what education could do for them and viewed education as a means to an end.

Key insights

- Education is largely viewed as a system that produces individuals who can fit into the society, become employable and eventually live independently.
- There were regional differences in defining the purpose of education among teachers. While education was viewed as a source of empowerment in Asia, Middle East and Africa, it was viewed as a means of social and environmental change in North America, Europe, Latin America and Caribbean. These differences contributed to regional variances in the teaching-learning practices.
- There was potential for conflicting definitions of the purpose of education by the stakeholders and the government policy makers. In such cases, stakeholders expressed discontentment in the system and a need to redefine the purpose of education to ensure holistic development of individuals.

Participant voices

Students echoed the notion that education was important for a “secure”, “bright”, and “successful” future and schools helped them develop skills like literacy and knowledge about the world. Almost 40% of the students said that going to school ‘gave them power’, made them feel ‘empowered’ and provided them with tools that helped them to ‘think for themselves’. Alisha, a 15-year-old girl from United States of America explained:

I would say at first, I went to school because I had to but now, I go to school because I just believe in general that Education gives you a lot of power. It helps you know what's real and what's fake and I think it's a really important skill in the world to be successful. You know I think the most successful people have a good background, a good education and are just able to think for themselves. I don't think a lot of people

Reimagining Education

are able to think for themselves and you know other people are able to mess with that so I think it's important to have a good education for that reason.

Even though most parents viewed sending children to school as a customary practice, they recognized the numerous benefits and iterated the need for education. Overall, parents hoped that schooling would “lay a foundation” to help children to live independently and “fit into the society”. Most parents largely viewed education as an “empowering tool” that not only “taps into the qualities and strengths of individuals” but also connects people from all over the world and opens up opportunities for collective evolution.

Parents were concerned that they would not be able to cater to all the needs of their children without schools. Carrie, mother of a child with learning disabilities from the Philippines, hoped that school will support her son to have “good living conditions in the future even though [she] may not always be there”. Several parents from Asia-Pacific and Africa explained that schooling bridges the gap between the limited skill set of parents and the unlimited opportunities present in the world:

All children do not have educated parents... the world is changing so fast and the way children need to be handled is changing so fast, but parents are the same one who are uneducated, they do not have the skills that are necessary to deal with the children as per their own needs. There is a conflict between [parents and children] ... Parents do not understand the psychological need of the children in this present generation (Naima, Bhutan).

About a tenth of the teachers used a historical perspective to point out that education was vital for the development of human civilization. Currently, education has become an inherent part of society and people without education “become almost like an outsider or outcast”. Even though almost all teachers agreed that the purpose of education was to help students “fit in the society” and “lead meaningful lives”, there were stark regional differences in teacher priorities while explaining the purpose of education.

Teachers from Africa strongly agreed that education provided them empowerment. Several participants from Asia-Pacific, Africa, Middle East and LAC mentioned that education provided them an opportunity to learn different languages and communicate their ideas with the world. They cited the example of being a part of the focus group discussions as an outcome of “being educated”. A teacher, Manny, from the Middle East claimed that “formal education is the single greatest predictor of social mobility and economic empowerment”. Several teachers from Asia-Pacific agreed that the primary goal of education was to prepare students to ensure financial stability in the future. However, two teachers from Japan and Malaysia, believed that

Reimagining Education

“the purpose of education is really to have fun” and to “create a society where people learn with inspiration and fun as opposed to just having second hand material and knowledge”. Teachers from North America and Europe predominantly spoke about the need to prepare students to communicate and cooperate with others, while the teachers from Latin America and Caribbean emphasized the need for education to contribute towards better societies and environmental sustainability.

Both the parents and teachers felt that learners are sent to the schools to fit into the societal norms. Most of them agreed that the implicit reason for going to school was to ensure financial security. Schooling was equated with getting good grades and getting a good job. Nora from the UK explained that from a government perspective, the “purpose of education is economic purpose. It’s to make sure that there is a work force in the future and so I think sometimes we lose the true purpose of education”. To truly fit in the society, parents hoped that education should not only concentrate on academic knowledge and employability, but also equip students with key social and emotional skills such as decision making, problem solving, communication, relationship skills and critical thinking.

Several teachers were concerned that schooling is a very automated process “we all meet in the same paradigm break- school, work, life and somewhere in this, school is just kind of the first step in this path” (Maria, Ukraine). However, all stakeholders were confident that schools had great potential to contribute positively to the lives of students. Specifically, in the context of schooling, teachers saw a need to reexamine the purpose and consider alternative ways of educating students. Simon, a male educator from Sri Lanka who was aiming to build an alternate school system explained:

[going to school is] what everybody else is doing, so, it’s sort of taken for granted that this is what you have to do. And in some cases, it is also forced by legislation that you have to go to school and parents could be fined if they don’t let their children go to school. So, there’s just a lot of inertia around it... that sort of question ... ‘is this the best way for a young person to spend thirteen years of their life’ doesn’t get probed well enough.

External Influences on Education

All participants recognized that there is an inseparable relationship between schools and society. However, a majority of the participants noted a dysfunctional relationship between schools and society. Ezra, a parent and teacher from Mexico explained metaphorically that schools and society have got “a divorce and they need to go to therapy” to recover their relationship.

Reimagining Education**Key insights**

- Societal dynamics related to political affiliations, economic ideologies and social stereotypes are replicated in schools and constantly affect student experiences and education.
- Even though government policies play a pivotal role in driving educational change, societal factors such as public opinions and stereotypes can have a strong influence on the way policies are implemented.
- In recent times, students and youth have been claiming their power to drive social change. Schools and educators have the responsibility to expose students to contemporary social and political issues and provide spaces for dialogue.

Participant voices

Participants had recognized that a primary purpose of education was to fit in the society. So, they observed a strong relationship between societal dynamics and schooling. As students, parents and teachers are inherently a part of the society, schools are heavily influenced by societal values and norms. Several problems in society like discrimination, bias and inequality have constantly infiltrated education and controlled the dynamics within the education system. Several parents, students, and teachers were concerned that education was being treated as a commodity and that commercialization was denying quality education access to less privileged children:

school can be very discriminatory ...in a sense that if you didn't have money you would not be doing as great as if you did have money... if you don't have the money you don't have the resources, then school is not that great because a lot of students don't do that great in school and then they can't necessary move forward or go to the college that they want to go to, get their Degrees that want, get the jobs they want to go to all because of the background they come from (Shannon, a female student from the United states of America)

The political and social climate, government decisions about funding and policies have a significant impact on education. Parents from all regions recognized that educational materials were influenced by local governments and politics, sometimes overlooking the interests of the society. Teachers explained that they strived to cater according to the expectations of the society and policies even if it “conflicts with [their] personal philosophy of education”.

Sometimes government policies made for equality and inclusion cannot be implemented effectively due to societal sentiments. For example, Poonam, a

Reimagining Education

teacher from India explained that a government initiative to integrate economically disadvantaged children into private schools was unsuccessful due to opposition from affluent families. As a result, several teachers noticed that their schools were composed of homogenous populations of students who had a biased understanding of the dynamics and problems in the society. Few parents reported specifically choosing more diverse schools to educate their children not only academically, but also to become more conscious and learn “to navigate the society”.

Even though society contributed to several problems within the education system, the role of societal factors on students’ upbringing and education was indispensable. Quoting the popular saying, “it takes a village to raise a child”, teachers and parents urged that everyone should take responsibility in developing the next generation of responsible adults:

the value that society places on education actually affects quality that has been delivered back to society...you have less budgeting given into the education sector you have demoralization of teachers and all that would come together to affect the quality of the education that the society would receive...[for] example, you have people who have done so well academically ... and [society] turns the other way and you have somebody who does something not exactly on the academic life but maybe something on the social aspect and then you reward him you make him an ambassador for youth and all that, you are sending a message to the society that education is not equally important. So, the younger ones will feel if I don't have to go through this process to be recognized. To be applauded I can cut corners and all that and make society applaud me. This shows how much a society values education that society would draw from (Ophelia, a mother from Nigeria).

A majority of participants believed in the potential of education and schooling to positively impact society with phrases such as “schools are agents of social change”, “the real goal, or the mission of the school is social reform”, and education empowers people “to seek a better life”. Participants highlighted the need for schools and educators to take a more active role in recognizing and contributing to societal issues to bridge the gap between schools and society.

With students being at the forefront of the climate change movement and other recent political movements, parents and teachers noted the merits of exposing students to the realities of the society from a very young age to build empathy and tolerance. Some teachers suggested a “community service learning” approach to support student agency “especially for adolescents... because they want to do it, they have the right to do it and they have the tools”.

Echoing the general sentiment of education policy makers, Vance, a father from the USA noted that “everyone thinks that they’re an expert [in education] because they

Reimagining Education

all went through it”. However, the participants hoped for more agency for students, teachers and parents in educational matters to voice their opinions and collectively be a part of the solution. Finally, recognizing the existing clash between schooling and local cultures, teachers and parents urged for mutual respect between the two:

if we harness [education] correctly, it can bring values to all societies. but it must be done in a culturally [responsive] and sustainable way where we respect the society that you are trying to bring education to without kind of saying that education that you have is kind of subpar and all the skills that your learning has come down from generation like the mother tongue you learn from your generation is now not really what society out there needs (Thea from South Africa)

Test Centric System of Education

Education around the world is tending towards a system driven by tests and assessments. In line with quote “one can, albeit with difficulty, defy the effects of bad teaching but escaping the impact of bad assessments is onerous indeed” (Wattal & Singh, 2021, para. 2), the stakeholders highlighted the impacts of being a part of a test centric system of education.

Key insights

- Teachers noted that the education systems were currently test-centric as students’ scores were used to evaluate teachers, schools and countries at large. The general competition at the global level was trickling down to students.
- Students considered the societal norm of judging them based on their test scores as unfair. Parents acknowledge that assessments cause a lot of stress and anxiety around assessments due to labeling of students and other discriminatory behavior. Teachers and parents should play a key role in identifying and supporting student’s interests that are not assessed on traditional assessments by embracing a ‘whole child assessment’ framework.
- Parents and teachers acknowledged that the assessment centric systems were deeply rooted in the education system; but the extreme stress associated with these assessments can be reduced by consciously changing the narrative around test scores.

Participant voices

Teachers from all regions viewed assessments as “an essential part of school because we have to know where we are ... so that [we] know how to move forward” (Angie,

Reimagining Education

USA). However, many teachers were unhappy that the education system had become test-centric. While some parents like Hani from Malaysia noted that ‘exams are bothersome’ and the ‘standards set by the government were very high’, about a tenth of the teachers spoke about the inherent flaws in the idea behind large scale testing. They were not only a mechanism to evaluate students, but also to evaluate teachers. Miles, 33-year-old male teacher working in Brazil explained:

We are under a lot of pressure to show that the students are progressing and that pressure comes from the government ... Students must be making X amount of progress and if you cannot prove this you will be put under special measures.

Teachers were disappointed by the “lack of trust” in them and noted that the governments used “these formal examinations to try and create some sort of assurance to people outside that the education system” is functioning well (Nora, UK). Teachers were concerned that the global rankings and competition between countries is ultimately trickling down to create stress, pressure and anxiety for students and teachers.

Students described tests and exams as “stressful” events or “nightmares”. They were under a lot of pressure to avoid performing poorly in exams as scores were “the only way the people [were] going to judge” them and treat them in prejudiced ways (Asher, Sri Lanka). Tests and exams were primarily used to create an atmosphere of competition. After facing the nervousness and anxiety, being able to perform better than their peers was enjoyable for some students. While some students from different regions felt pressured to write what the teachers ‘want’ or ‘expect’ instead of their own views and opinions, some other students tend to forget everything they have learnt and underperform in exams due to stress. Irrespective of their ability to perform, students felt that the current assessments were “too crude” to judge their ability to succeed in the future, or accurately evaluate their learning.

In agreement with students, most parents felt that the labelling was often discriminatory and would leave students “believing for life that they are worth nothing”. Olfa, mother of a teenage boy from South Africa shared her concerns:

[students] cannot learn when they are driven by fear and anxiety that creates a society where every child is on anti-anxiety or antidepressant or a calmativ or focusing pill. So, we are dealing with a society of young children who have to be medicated in order to learn, it doesn't make any sense to me.

Dismissing the idea of “dull children” parents hoped that assessments focused on students’ strengths, making education more fun for them and pushing them in the right direction. Most parents and students across the regions agreed that

Reimagining Education

‘assessments should aid learning’. Students hoped for assessments to move away from memorization and evaluate their ability to apply their knowledge to solve real world problems. Parents preferred formative assessments and more comprehensive evaluations that are not limited to academic grading only. Many parents suggested alternate tools of assessments for all K to 12 students such as observing students in their natural environment, how they interact with each other, how they observe and learn.

While most parents advocated for the reforms in the assessment system, with more active involvement of the students, a few parents from middle east and Asia pacific regions were satisfied with the current assessment systems and felt that “we turned out to be ok” and the status quo should work fine for their children as well.

Teachers collectively identified a need for reforms in the existing assessment system. However, as assessments were an important part of the educational experience, they cannot be changed independently from the rest of the educational experience. Some teachers from Asia-Pacific region reported that they were unable to move away from the traditional way of testing and assigning grades as they had too many students to manage. However, several teachers suggested using “creativity and imagination” to adopt a “escape the test approach” (Maria, Ukraine). Few teachers from Africa and North America suggested using Project based or game-based assessments. Some teachers from Latin America and the Middle East suggested ways of using students’ mistakes as opportunities for learning. Jacob, 46-year-old male teacher from Belize gave an example of a student who unknowingly recorded herself while explaining her confusion to her mother. When Jacob decided to grade her mistake, “she felt confident in what she was doing” and was “so happy!”. Similarly, Yuri, a 54-year-old male teacher from Qatar had observed that students were more confident when they were allowed to self-assess, as students “feel trust [when] they give themselves the feedback and learn something.”

In spite of their vision of ideal assessment systems, parents and teachers recognized the existing constraints of the education system. Parents particularly felt that rhetoric around assessments should change and parents need to take ownership of the ‘pressure’ it puts students under. In words of Lina, a mother from Kyrgyzstan:

assessment is standardized in each country. Honestly, I don't think it's easy to change. Since there is a standard setting which they have to keep in mind. I think it's more important how parents perceive assessment. I think as parents we need to change our attitude and even schools should change their attitude like if a student is getting grade F.

*Reimagining Education***Constrained Curriculum and Teaching Practices**

The students, teachers and parents felt that even after spending a considerable amount of time in school, most learners don't feel prepared to face life after school. Based on their experiences, stakeholders discussed some desirable changes in the education system.

Key insights

- All stakeholders recognized a lack of student agency in the learning process. While the school curricula are predefined, teachers realized a need to take into account students' learning interests and find ways to accommodate them into their classes.
- Students want to learn beyond the basic literacy and numeracy skills. They demanded discussions and exposure to topics such as sexuality, global political movements, and inter-cultural issues.
- Most parents felt that the primary objective of education systems was to aid students to obtain jobs, however this goal was often unmet by the current curriculum.

Participant voices

Successful schooling was globally equated with “more materialistic things, ... getting good grades, ... getting into good universities, ... building a career”. Parents were concerned that the current education system valued academic knowledge and degree certifications to “build a workforce” rather than develop informed and free thinkers. Anna, a mother of two teenage girls from Germany noted that children will “face even bigger problems” and unforeseen global challenges in the future, so, they have to learn “to think and innovate”. Ironically, the outdated syllabus in schools were not preparing students for the real world:

you get the message again both as a parent and as an educator that ‘oh, we’re putting this focus on writing and math and reading because that’s what they need in the job market’. But we know when we hear from CEOs that what they need in the job market is just the opposite and seeing people who can think critically and creatively and we’re not producing that we’re not encouraging children to do that in school (Emmette, a father from the US).

Similarly, students strongly agreed that “we have totally outlived” the utility of the education system, referring to the current state of the curriculum. Almost

Reimagining Education

all the students who participated in the focused group discussions stressed on the importance of gaining “practical knowledge” over “theoretical concepts”. Students demanded that education should prepare them for life by addressing concerns like exploring career options, “how to get a job”, “how to rent an apartment”, how to plan finances, and “how to pay taxes”. They wanted to learn more about “real world issues” and more about “other cultures and countries”.

Ultimately, students suggested education should “start going towards development of individuals” and teach them “to be a good human being”. Most students felt that the schools in the current form were not ‘inclusive’ ‘safe spaces’ for discussions about a variety of topics such as sexuality and sexual preferences, as educators were hesitant to discuss taboo topics. Frustrated by the slow changes in the education system, a student from Sri Lanka voiced his lack of hope:

[these problems] of education system have been prevalent from very long time... it's also a bit disappointing that you know after all this education system and all these policies have been changed to a better one that we won't be able to benefit from that, during our school life

In agreement with parents and students, teachers recognized the general challenges with the education systems. Manny, a female teacher who works in North America and the Middle East explained:

Education in general is coming under this criticism as the world is stuck in fairly archaic models of what knowledge is required for success in life. We are treating subjects and disciplines as fairly arbitrary and not necessarily integrative into most people's practical life experiences

Teachers from all regions recognized that students lacked agency in the learning process. Even though education should equip students to survive independently in the world, teachers recognized that “a lot of the education system doesn't really nurture that agency” (Ivan, Bangladesh), describing it as a “prescription for failure” (Raylee, USA). Elementary school teachers identified that young children were “curious about a lot of things” (Isiri, India), but high school teachers observed that their students did not exhibit this curiosity anymore. Kiara, 53-year-old female teacher from USA elaborated:

to answer the question of what our students want to learn, they have no idea. They have no idea what they want to learn. They've been told, they've been tracked, they've been put into classes because somebody somewhere the guidance counsellor or somebody said that you know, you need to take this class in order to be successful.

Reimagining Education

As a step towards promoting student agency, there is a need for dialogue within the classroom instead of a “monologue from the teacher to students” (Maria, Ukraine).

Education as a Social and Emotional Activity

Most parents, students and teachers acknowledged that the role of education should not be limited to instill academic knowledge. The stakeholders viewed education as a social and emotional activity and demanded that schools should ensure ‘Social and Emotional’ well-being of the learners while equipping the learners with necessary SE skills.

Key insights

- An important aspect of education for students is to navigate social situations and understand personal strengths and weaknesses.
- Learning is not only limited to intellectual activities, but strongly influenced by the social and emotional experiences during learning.
- In conjunction with academics, supporting mental health and social and emotional well-being of the learners should be a primary objective of the education system. In other words, Social and emotional learning needs to be mainstreamed in education systems.

Participant voices

Most students said that apart from “gaining knowledge and skills”, school plays a very important role in helping them acquire social skills as it provides an opportunity to meet and engage with their peers. Students also stressed on the importance of ‘interaction’ with their peers and teachers as they feel that the engagement gains them skills such as “problem solving”, “self-management” and “ability to work together with different people”.

Almost all teachers recognized that the learning at school is not only academic knowledge from books but also from their social and emotional experiences. A teacher Rylee from the USA reiterated, “we know that the learning is social and it’s emotional so we have to create these rich learning experiences in innovative ways”. Some other teachers from Europe, North America, Latin America and Caribbean noticed that students want to discover more about themselves and how to fit into the world. Kora, a 39-year-old female Montessori teacher from Columbia explained:

The whole motivation of students is discovery, not just discovering at an intellectual way but also discovering how I can get this person to like me or how can I be his

Reimagining Education

friend or be his girlfriend or stuff like that. discovering ways of getting stuff done and learning about yourself.

Teachers were often concerned that important aspects of student development were getting lost in the complex education systems. While young children have the opportunity for a balance between their academic and social life, school interferes with organic development of children in higher grades. Mugo from Kenya explained that students sometimes are not able to even interact with their parents and siblings, “because it is homework, homework, one teacher after another one”. Several teachers like Denise, a female teacher from Qatar, noted that students’ needs were often unmet by schools:

There is no other species on this planet that needs to learn how to survive or live or exist. They do it, but we have complicated the process because we are not in touch with our true self. And to find that true self, we need to be more connected to our immediate surroundings, family, values, and what schooling has done is take out all that from us.

Since the participants identified “a mismatch between [the current education] system designed for efficiency and the human need to find your space or place in the world”, teachers and parents considered it of utmost importance to “consider [students] have a life as children and they should have a more meaningful life as children as well”. Thus, the responsibility of schools was not only to equip students with degrees for the future, but provide them with meaningful life experiences in school itself.

Similarly, most students stressed on the importance of mental health and echoed the notion that schools are not doing enough for the social and emotional well being of the students. Students stressed on the importance of “caring more for the mental health of the students” and providing tools to the students to “manage relationships, stress and emotions”. A young female student from the United States shared,

I just hope that relationships and school could change so that schools may care more about mental health and more about the person outside of school, and they also care about education but also about what people have going on outside of school because that can impact the person a lot. So, I just hope to see like a change in everything that teachers care about

Even when teachers saw a need for supporting some additional competencies such as social and emotional skills, they were constrained by the slow changes in the education systems:

Reimagining Education

We have this gap where we are still learning hard skills without asking any questions. Why are we not putting the course on emotional intelligence, for example meditation, consciousness or how to make decisions, how to become, how to use your personal time, how to sit well ... [there is] around may be 50 years of positive research on it specially on social learning, social emotional learning and we still not putting inside of our academic programs ... because it's very difficult to move and change system (Alesia, Ukraine)

School Climate and Power Dynamics in the Classroom

Several participants identified the need for the school climate to be a 'safe space' for students. Components of a safe space included an environment where students could express themselves freely, learn from their experiences and mistakes, and become "lifelong learners to continue to learn and grow in their development as human beings". Peers and teachers were the major factors contributing to the school climate.

Key insights

- Students feel a sense of belonging in learning spaces when they establish strong, respectful and inclusive relationships with their peers and teachers.
- Role of the teachers is critical not only in influencing the learning experience, but also in the overall development of children. Biases or negative comments from the teachers can scar students for life and have devastating effects on them.
- Teachers have the responsibility to acknowledge an unequal power dynamic within the classroom and act cautiously.

Participant voices

Most students agreed that relationships with peers was critical in developing a sense of belonging at school. Some students like Alexie from UAE described their motivation for going to school was to "meet friends" and "have a fun time" as friendships were "the best" part of life at school. Some other students like Max from Mexico noted that through interactions with their friends, they learn to respect people, take care of them and be better people. For several students like Sri from India, their peers were a strong support group, "because they are still there for [them], through everything". However, in rare cases, peers negatively contributed to students' experiences due to instances of bullying.

All stakeholders noted the pivotal role of teachers who "orchestrate everything in the classroom". As students constantly observe their teachers, everything about a

Reimagining Education

teacher's behavior including their smile impacts the students. Parents were concerned about the impact of unconscious bias and stereotypes held by the teachers on their children and their future career paths. Highlighting the trend of categorizing students based on their academic abilities, Thomas, father from the US shared:

There are teachers and there are systems of Education that along the way make us feel lesser than we are, make us feel dumb. Making someone feel a certain way. Like those feelings get deep rooted into our beings into our minds and our hearts and we live with this this belief, this self-view that can deeply limit who we are

Several students from all regions provided instances of biased treatment. Some students reported that a gender bias was restricting female students' from using school resources and choosing specific sports, while some others noted biased grading. For example, Karina, a student from Germany noted that she received a better grade than her friend who "wrote down similar things" in a test because of teacher favoritism and wished that teachers would actually grade the work and "not just who you are". Students often associate a teacher with an "open mind", who could relate to them in terms of real-life experiences, as a better teacher rather than a teacher who knows the subject very well. Broadly classifying teachers and describing an ideal teacher, Rajesh from Bangladesh explained:

The teachers in our school are in two opposite directions, [teachers] in center, balanced out are very rare. So, one side is evil, egoistic and angry all the time and very strict teachers. What I mean by egoistic is that if you point out their mistake, they will take us out of the class, scold us. The other side is the teachers who do not say anything to students, those teachers are the teachers who are taken advantage of and my school people bully those types of teachers...So, it's very rare to find teachers in our schools who are friends to you, only at times like when it's necessary admitting their mistakes and helping the students out. And those are the teachers that all would like.

Some teachers like Jordan from Columbia suggested that teachers have the responsibility to build better relationships with their students by becoming aware of their own values:

adolescents have ways to communicate and sometimes when we are not prepared [or] don't know ourselves and our fears or weaknesses we just shout at them and ask them to sit down... so that is where the problem remains ... because as soon as some voices began to raise up in their ways, it's easier to shut them down. so,

Reimagining Education

it is important to understand ourselves better and know yourself better and the characteristics of every stage of development of students.

Further, by changing the norms of the traditional classroom and encouraging “two-way conversation”, teachers can motivate their students and indicate that students are “important enough”, “significant enough” and their “opinions and questions matter”.

Educational infrastructure**Key insights**

- Participants from all regions indicated that physical learning space was an important factor in their overall educational experience.
- Several schools in Asia-Pacific and Africa regions had inadequate infrastructure in terms of school building, furniture and basic educational resources.
- Allowing flexible use of resources available inside and outside the classroom could benefit the teaching - learning experience in all regions of the world.

Participant voices

All participants felt that learning spaces are critical to student’s learning and attention to the physical environment is necessary to create a conducive environment for learning. Teachers from all regions noted that ensuring a safe physical space for students was their primary concern as educators. Teachers especially from Africa and Asia-Pacific mentioned existing challenges with infrastructure. Aurora, a 34-year-old educator from Nigeria explained that commercialization of education had led to establishment of private schools that educated students from “just three-bedroom apartments” with several partitions for classrooms. These types of arrangements were very restrictive and difficult for students to learn in. Several participants noticed that the elements within the learning spaces and their arrangement could shape the overall classroom dynamics. Simon, an educational entrepreneur from Sri Lanka elaborated:

In the typical classroom setup, children [are seated] in rows and teacher [is] in front of the blackboard ... There is a power dynamic that comes when someone is standing in front [and] you are seated and facing the person, and you essentially need permission to talk to somebody else or get up to go to the toilet, that kind of thing.

Reimagining Education

In an effort to move away from the typical teacher-led classrooms and promote “engagement and social interaction between the teachers and the students”, parents and students suggested flexible seating arrangements such as sitting in groups or in a circle. Highlighting the limitations of rigid classroom arrangements, Elizabeth, mother of a teenage boy from Canada explained:

Some of [the students] adapt easily to sitting in a chair for long hours and then others, if we restrict kids from moving, then they're going to not be able to concentrate anymore. Because that's just how they learn, a lot of kids learn by doing. And if we just make them sit and listen, they're not going to succeed in their going to be labeled as the failure.

Students, teachers and parents collectively identified some key components of a classroom that was ideal for learning activities:

- Ample natural light or good lighting
- Well ventilated classrooms with comfortable temperature
- Not crowded and congested with a reasonable student-teacher ratio
- Comfortable and flexible seating for the students
- Colorful walls in the classroom and display of paintings, artworks from the children
- Access to green space or inclusion of indoor plants in the classroom

A few students and parents mentioned that having subject wise classrooms helps students learn better as students “associate learning with the learning space” and the subject related things present there. Further, participants emphasized the idea that learning spaces need to be more than a physical arrangement of objects:

This place should inspire, motivate to learn, to search, to study, to create and I need to give this opportunity starting from the classroom... walls with stickers, posters, some kind of quotes... it's always changing. It's like moving, you can feel the life inside of this ... For me it's not the class, it's not just a box, it's not just a room, it's a space and we need to fill this space with a lot of opportunities for kids (Maria, teacher from Ukraine).

Teachers and parents noted that there were global trends in designing classrooms and learning environments. Along with “taking children away from nature and putting them more and more into four walls of concrete”, school systems looked to adapt classroom structures used in other successful education systems. Participants

Reimagining Education

noted that these trends are far from effective and called for more initiatives to draw on local culture and resources to design their learning spaces.

Teachers shared examples of using flexible classroom arrangements in low resource scenarios such as replacing old uncomfortable chairs with a carpet (Pardaj, a teacher from Afghanistan), and using nature and outdoors to ensure an enjoyable learning space:

some of the schools in rural Uganda where there wasn't electricity, there were very great classes ...for example, the teacher had made a giant compass in the compound where the children were moving around the compass in different ways giving each other challenges... [there was another] science lesson, which was built around the whole story [on] ...how could you separate the sugar and the dirt and they did this practically (Lia, Scottish teacher working in Uganda).

While more than 70% of the children reported to enjoy learning in an outdoor environment or green space, teachers noted that school management and leadership were often hesitant to approve or allow non-traditional classroom structures.

Educational Technology and Remote Learning

Using online modes of teaching was the new norm due to the COVID-19 Pandemic. As the focus group discussions were conducted between August and November of 2020, the experiences of the stakeholders with educational technology were influenced by the use of remote learning during the pandemic.

Key insights

- Use of educational technology such as the internet challenges the traditional notion of “teacher as a gatekeeper of knowledge” and promotes student agency in learning.
- Technology enhances the teaching-learning processes in innovative ways. However, digital tools and resources should be used cautiously to supplement traditional teaching, but not as a replacement.
- Along with technology literacy, students should be informed of the health risks associated with technology use and trained to use devices responsibly.

Participant voices

All participants observed the ubiquitous role of technology in the world and viewed technology literacy as a necessary component of education. While all students

Reimagining Education

were using technology for remote education, most students from Africa and few students from the middle east reported a lack of technology use at school prior to the COVID-19 pandemic. The stakeholders collectively identified the prominent constraints for educational use of technology such as (a) limited access to devices and internet, (b) restrictive school policies, and (c) gaps in teachers' technology literacy.

Most teachers from Asia-pacific, North America, Europe and LAC expressed enthusiasm about the possibilities of technology in revolutionizing teaching and learning practices. Parents and teachers were excited by the possibilities of multimodal digital learning that can effectively cater to learners with different abilities and learning preferences. In contrast to other rigid educational policies imposed by the government, teachers viewed that emergency online teaching during the pandemic could provide them with opportunities for educational innovations from bottom up. More than 60% of the students reported that technology supported their learning experience by providing them new opportunities to gain knowledge and more agency to choose the 'what', 'when' and 'how' to learn. However, teachers advised caution in choosing digital tools for education, as some common applications such as YouTube "designed to become aggressively more extreme" might lead students to incorrect or biased information when used without guidance.

Completely online classes presented unique challenges for teachers in different regions. Several teachers from Africa and the Middle East and few teachers from Asia-pacific emphasized the need to continue traditional face-to-face teaching with physical educational materials given the embedded socioeconomic inequalities within the society. Particularly in households with several children, parents struggled to ensure access and a suitable learning environment for all learners. Teachers from all regions expressed concerns over virtually occupying students' personal space. Teachers from North America and the Middle East were concerned that data privacy laws prevented them from seeing the students and their body language, thus interfering with their communication and teaching.

Due to mandatory remote classrooms, most students went from almost "zero screen time during the school week and limited on the weekends, to full screen time". While an overwhelming majority of the parents were concerned about the health risks of prolonged device use, several students reported a fatigue of digital interactions. Students felt that some remote schooling practices kept them under constant surveillance, but lack of personal connection with teachers and peers leading to a feeling of social isolation.

In the midst of rapid technological advancements and automation, the question of whether technology will radically shape our education system has been constantly examined (Selwyn, 2019). While all participants recognized the role of digital technology in education for the future, less than 1% of the participants described a future education system without traditional school buildings and teachers. In this

Reimagining Education

futuristic view, there is an extreme reliance on devices and the internet for educational activities (Elayyan, 2021). However, an overwhelming majority of the participants did not view this as a desirable direction for education. Instead, participants hoped for a hybrid of technologically innovative and traditional ways of teaching. Further, two teachers, Ezra from Mexico and Mugo from Kenya expressed a need to redefine technology for education. By going beyond “technology related to computers” they suggest imagining creative technology to close access gaps (such as assistive technology for physically challenged students), rather than amplify the existing gaps.

CONCLUSION

Education was primarily viewed as a means to ensure financial stability and independence by preparing children for real life. Students, teachers and parents from different regions of the world unanimously agreed that education, in its current form, was overly focusing on academic knowledge and standardized tests while ignoring important aspects of children’s overall development. Due to the test centric nature of the education system, teachers often felt overburdened and micromanaged, while their agency to contribute towards educational change was severely limited. Similarly, students appreciated the opportunity to receive education, but felt limited by the rigidity of the system.

DISCUSSION

Globalization has provided opportunities for countries to share knowledge and educational practices, but also created an atmosphere of comparison and competition between nations. Competitive international assessments such as Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS) and Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) are increasingly used by several countries to evaluate their education system and drive policy changes (Kijima & Lipsy, 2020). The convergence of education systems around the world towards a globalized ideal education system has created tensions between standardizing education and promoting quality education according to student needs (Sahlberg, 2006). These tensions were very apparent in the stakeholder discussions when students, teachers, and parents expressed their concerns with the current education system. Stakeholders from all regions were concerned that the test centric approach to education limits the focus to performance on standardized tests in few subjects. The curriculum overly focused on academic knowledge and skills that improve test performance and ignored social and emotional wellbeing, real-life events, practical skills and applications of knowledge. At the

Reimagining Education

policy level, there is a strong need to reevaluate the role of assessments and adverse effects of standardized testing.

The crucial role of education and educated citizenry in improving the economic competency of nations is widely accepted. However, an emerging body of literature is challenging this view by positioning education towards human flourishing instead of economic dominance (Bang, M., & Vossoughi, 2016; Gutiérrez & Jurow, 2016; Takeuchi, Sengupta, Shanahan, Adams & Hachem, 2020). Participants echoed this sentiment. Students came to school from unique social, political and historical backgrounds. However, students all over the world were restricted to similar subject content at school that often ignored their rich lived experiences. As a result, participants questioned if the education system in its current form was adequate to support the achievement of their individual life goals. In order to fill the gap between national curriculum objectives and local student needs, education systems should support the agency of students, teachers and schools in locally altering curriculum requirements and teaching practices.

In a world that is increasingly focusing on quantification, ranking, efficiency and optimization, there is a need to approach education and educational reform in a more nuanced way. We recommend that education systems around the world shift their focus away from global comparison and refocus on meeting local needs. Ensuring the well-being and personal growth of students and teachers must be an educational priority rather than mass production of “educated” citizens. Finally, the key stakeholders in education must be afforded opportunities to contribute to educational change in various capacities.

ACKNOWLEDGMENT

This research was supported by the UNESCO Mahatma Gandhi Institute of Education for Peace and Sustainability (MGIEP). The views, thoughts, and opinions expressed in this article belong solely to the authors and do not reflect the views of UNESCO MGIEP.

REFERENCES

- Arnové, R. F. (2005). To what ends: Educational reform around the world. *Indiana Journal of Global Legal Studies*, 12(1), 79–95. doi:10.2979/gls.2005.12.1.79
- Bang, M., & Vossoughi, S. (2016). *Participatory design research and educational justice: Studying learning and relations within social change making*. Academic Press.

Reimagining Education

Bowen, J. (2018). *A History of Western Education: The Ancient World: Orient and Mediterranean 2000 BC–AD 1054*. Routledge. doi:10.4324/9781315016221

Cabrera, J. (2016). *Factors of Failure in National Education Systems Reforms*. https://www.academia.edu/27118771/Factors_of_Failure_in_National_Education_Systems_Reforms_2nd_Draft_

Cummings, W. K. (2010). How Educational Systems Form and Reform. In J. Zajda & M.A. Geo-JaJa (Eds.), *The politics of education reforms* (pp. 19-39). Springer. doi:10.1007/978-90-481-3218-8_2

Elayyan, S. (2021). The future of education according to the fourth industrial revolution. *Journal of Educational Technology and Online Learning*, 4(1), 23–30.

Fuller, K., & Stevenson, H. (2019). Global education reform: Understanding the movement. *Educational Review*, 71(1), 1–4. doi:10.1080/00131911.2019.1532718

Ghaffarzadegan, N., Larson, R., & Hawley, J. (2017). Education as a complex system. *Systems Research and Behavioral Science*, 34(3), 211–215. doi:10.1002/res.2405 PMID:28522920

Goodson, I. (2007). All the lonely people: The struggle for private meaning and public purpose in education. *Critical Studies in Education*, 48(1), 131–148. doi:10.1080/17508480601120954

Gutiérrez, K. D., & Jurow, A. S. (2016). Social design experiments: Toward equity by design. *Journal of the Learning Sciences*, 25(4), 565–598. doi:10.1080/10508406.2016.1204548

Honig, M. I. (2004). Where's the “up” in bottom-up reform? *Educational Policy*, 18(4), 527–561. doi:10.1177/0895904804266640

Kijima, R., & Lipsy, P. Y. (2020). International assessments and education policy: Evidence from an elite survey. In J. Kelley & B. Simmons (Eds.), *The Power of global performance indicators* (pp. 174–202). Cambridge University Press. doi:10.1017/9781108763493.007

Levin, B. (2004). *Reforming education: From origins to outcomes*. Routledge. doi:10.4324/9780203482193

Mayfield, B. (2019). *The purpose of education: a talk on teaching our students how to think* [Unpublished thesis]. Ball State University, Muncie, IN, United States.

Murphy, B. G. (2017). *Inside our schools: Teachers on the failure and future of education reform*. Harvard Education Press.

Reimagining Education

- Priestley, M., & Drew, V. (2016, September). *Teachers as agents of curriculum change: closing the gap between purpose and practice* [Paper Presentation]. *The European Conference for Educational Research*, Dublin, Ireland.
- Rentner, D., Kober, N., & Frizzell, M. (2016). *Listen to us: Teacher views and voices*. Retrieved from Centre on Education Policy website: <http://www.cepc.org/displayDocument.cfm?DocumentID=1456>
- Sahlberg, P. (2006). Education reform for raising economic competitiveness. *Journal of Educational Change*, 7(4), 259–287. doi:10.1007/10833-005-4884-6
- Selwyn, N. (2019). *Should robots replace teachers? AI and the future of education*. John Wiley & Sons.
- Shaked, H., & Schechter, C. (2019). School middle leaders' sense making of a generally outlined education reform. *Leadership and Policy in Schools*, 18(3), 412–432. doi:10.1080/15700763.2018.1450513
- Takeuchi, M. A., Sengupta, P., Shanahan, M. C., Adams, J. D., & Hachem, M. (2020). Transdisciplinarity in STEM education: A critical review. *Studies in Science Education*, 56(2), 213–253. doi:10.1080/03057267.2020.1755802
- UNESCO. (2015). *Education 2030 Framework for Action: Towards inclusive and equitable quality education and lifelong learning for all*. http://www.unesco.org/new/fileadmin/MULTIMEDIA/HQ/ED/ED_new/pdf/FFA-ENG-27Oct15.pdf
- UNESCO. (2020). *Education: From disruption to recovery*. <https://en.unesco.org/covid19/educationresponse>
- Wattal, A. M., & Singh, C. (2021, June 8). An era of new-age school assessments. *Hindustan Times*. <https://www.hindustantimes.com/analysis/an-era-of-new-age-school-assessments-101622990312580.html>