

Rethinking Education



Poonam Batra

Abstract This paper begins with a critique of neoliberal reforms that have shaped education to fulfil individual aims and self-interest defined in narrow economic terms. Embedded in coloniality, the neoliberal education project accords priority to skill development over human capacities to relate, cohere and be just. Questioning Euro-centric universalism has led to the view that the world we live in is a pluriverse. Epistemological and ontological questions are therefore fundamental in engaging with issues of social inequality and the Anthropocene. To enable equity and social justice, it is important to design content and processes of education that are egalitarian and emancipatory in nature. Social and environmental movements and the construction of anti-colonial national imaginaries in diverse societies can provide new discourses of education. The project of human education is a challenge of content as well as pedagogic approaches, as true education is as much about liberating others as oneself.

1 Introduction

Education systems across the contemporary world have been shaped by neoliberal reforms for over three decades. The international education project¹ that drives these reforms is entwined with ideas of modernity and development embedded in coloniality. With multiple meanings, practices and experiences, colonialism was a cultural project whose influence is palpable in contemporary societies of the global south. Reforms have influenced education policy in different countries, leading to policy

¹ The term ‘international education project’ is being used here as an umbrella term that indicates the convergence of a host of international think tanks and players: global networks and projects, including bilateral agencies that form part of an international education community such as the EFA and a global epistemic community that Stephen Ball talks about (Ball, S. J. [2012]. *Global education inc: New policy networks and the neo-liberal imaginary*. Routledge).

P. Batra (✉)

Formerly with the Central Institute of Education, University of Delhi, Delhi, India

e-mail: batra.poonam@gmail.com

‘borrowing’ via a ‘global epistemic community’ and processes of ‘internationalisation’. Instead of learning from decolonised and subaltern knowledges, what we see is a disruption of diverse post-colonial processes via a reform policy transfer—constructed in decontextualised abstraction, rationalised by a target-driven universal agenda (Batra, 2019).

Based on the human capital approach, the neoliberal agenda for education is designed to fulfil individual aims and self-interest defined in narrow economic terms. This has created a wedge between the needs of society and policy formulation. According to Pinar (2015: 223), neoliberal reforms mirror colonialism that ‘increases cultural dependency and political subjugation while encouraging modernisation with its rhetoric of rights and reparation’.

The tendency of contemporary education to incorporate interests of global capitalism and the free market accords priority to the development of specific skills over human capacities to relate, cohere and be just, thus limiting human agency. With undue focus on instrumental aims of education, ‘knowledge’ itself is being repositioned, even marginalised. What kind of knowledges are disseminated and others suppressed; which knowledge has premium and why; and how the power of reason is undermined in preference for popular identities and desires, distorts the idea of individual rights and social justice. In this context, it becomes critical to examine how ‘knowledge’ itself becomes a pawn in the politics of power. This compels us to examine the limits of neoliberal models of economic production and their impact on education policy and practice, particularly in impeding processes of social democracy.

The neoliberal agenda not only dictates curriculum content that serves the free market in a globalised economy, it dictates what happens inside the classroom as well. For instance, the emphasis on STEM propagated by international assessments have filled up the space of school curricula and pedagogic communication. School timetables are reluctant to allot time to social sciences as these are not critical to competing in international assessment tests. In teacher education too, sociology and philosophy are no longer theoretical markers for developing teachers with critical understanding of learners, contexts of learning, knowledge and pedagogical communication. The undermining of social sciences also appears to be taking away the possibility of studying how neoliberal policies and the free market impact societies, creating alienation, especially among the youth.

2 Contestations in Educational Debates

There have been continuing debates on how existing systems of education tend to reproduce divisiveness and hierarchies in society, and the extent to which education can resist imposition of dominant knowledges and pedagogies that stifle democratic ways of thinking. School curriculum has been examined as a space of intervention where both kinds of forces operate—those which maintain status quo and those which attempt to disrupt processes that sustain inequality and injustice, in order to create

a more just society. Models of teacher education on the other hand, have been slow to change. Most tend to remain disconnected from classroom and social realities, tending towards the promotion of ‘universal’ theoretical knowledges and ‘one size fits all’ kind of solutions. This tends to disempower teachers who are trained to think of ‘knowledge’ as a set of givens; learners as disconnected from their socio-cultural milieu; and teaching as an act of authority and control. Teacher education curricula and pedagogic approaches rarely empower the developing teacher to exercise agency in classrooms, schools and policy making (Batra, 2005, 2014).

In examining different kinds of knowledges, it is important to engage with how ‘science’ as ‘content’ and ‘method’ has dominated formal school and teacher education. At the same time, the concept of ‘folk’ theory and ‘practical’, tacit or ‘common-sensical’ knowledge often positioned as the key to develop ‘good teachers’, needs critical interrogation.

In privileging universal, de-contextualised knowledge, school and teacher education curricula tend to undermine and make invisible knowledges and knowledge systems that emanate from diverse societal contexts. The pedagogical influence of the ‘geo-politics of knowledge’ leads to an education that disempowers, leaving virtually no space for cultivating human agency to change the conditions we work and live in. In this frame, equity ceases to be the aim of education. Instead, education ends up strengthening systems and processes that sustain inequality and social injustice.

3 Contours of an Emancipatory Education

Colonisers have typically viewed culture as an impediment to educate, modernise and develop scientific thinking and universal knowledge.² As a consequence, education remained disconnected from people’s lives and social milieu even in post-colonial societies, leading to alienation from formal knowledge.³ For education to become human, it is important to view culture as a means of meaning-making and making knowledge socially and politically relevant. While culture contextualises formal knowledge and is crucial to cultivating capacities for critical thinking and problem-solving, it must also become the subject of interrogation and inquiry. For instance, it would be critical to examine how prejudiced ‘local knowledges’ can be projected as ‘cultural’ and posed as major frameworks of ‘human values’ based on ‘religion’, ‘social norms and behaviour’ that are violative of basic human rights. Diverse cultures may also offer diverse means of education and pedagogical approaches other

² Colonisers’ rejection of sociocultural contexts and knowledge in shaping curriculum in India created deep conflict between education and culture, thus isolating school knowledge from the socio-cultural milieu of children (Kumar, 2005).

³ This isolation characterises the bulk of educational practice in India and lies at the root of the country’s poor performance in universalising critical education (Batra, 2014).

than those associated with formal education, such as apprenticeship, communities of practice, situated cognition.

If education is indeed a shared and global responsibility, it must first acknowledge the need to address specific needs of diverse societies. Universal solutions to the specific problems that societies across the world encounter cannot be the path forward, mainly because many of these problems may have occurred as a consequence of universal⁴ ways of looking at educating diverse societies. This engagement compels us to bring back classical debates and reflections, emanating from philosophical theorisation on the relationship between education and the kind of society we want. Scholarship across the world is likely to provide a variety of examples that could help us discuss the relationship between education and society in the context of different socio-cultural worlds, including colonial struggles and post-colonial engagements.

Aims of education encompass the growth of both—the individual and the society. While education provides the reorganisation of experience leading to growth of the individual child, it is also the most critical agency for reconstruction and maintenance of society's democratic principles (Dewey, 1938). The critical link between experience and education, lucidly articulated by Dewey stands discarded as a guiding principle in the current arrangements of formal education. This has undermined the need to reflect on one's actions and thought as necessary to develop finer capacities and sensibilities—the ability to discern, understand and negotiate the limitations of language as the only tool of communication.

Developing an ethical sense and sensibilities in Deweyan terms needs to be distinguished from ideas of developing morality and values. Moral education over the years has led to privileging some communities or religions leading to competitiveness rather than social cohesiveness. It may be more meaningful to define human values in the context of progressive and democratic societies and countries that foreground ideals of equality, liberty, justice and fraternity.

In order that education makes 'social equality and social justice' viable aims of education (acknowledging that education alone cannot achieve this), it is important to select and treat content, and design processes of education that are egalitarian and emancipatory in nature. It would be necessary to bring into the 'content' of education, key concerns that help to problematise social, economic, environmental, political realities that pose major challenges to human civilisation. These could be: ideological debates, the institution of patriarchy, issues of protectionism, impact of climate change on the most vulnerable, white supremacy and the upsurge in racist and casteist behaviour across societies. It would be necessary to examine how these are perpetuated through school and higher education curricula, and through politically motivated concerted efforts at altering popular historical consciousness of large masses of people.

⁴ The term 'universal' refers to the universal frames which have dominated educational discourses, such as theories of child development; theories of learning that have little scope to account for cross-cultural differences. Viewing children/learners and the process of education from a universal prism undermines diversities of language, culture and socio-economic realities that shape children and the manner in which they learn.

While a lot can be achieved via appropriate selection of curriculum content and its treatment, critical pedagogic communication is necessary to ensure that learners engage with social diversity and multiple perspectives, and understand their own and others' position in society. Pedagogical communication needs to follow basic principles of democracy. This can be achieved by: engaging with difference, as in diversity and the impact of intersectionalities; teaching and studying an understanding of and coping with 'alterity'—a comprehensive relationship with the other; to teach to respect all and listen to the 'other'. Alterity is particularly important in enabling young people to understand diversity and appreciate difference rather than hierarchise difference. A nuanced engagement with diverse perspectives can help the human mind to make itself supple and profound.

Teacher education programmes for instance, ought to help surface conflicts and dilemmas in a manner that allows participants to empathise, appreciate diversity and question hierarchies of power. As argued by Maturana and Valera, 'Conflict can go away only if we move to another domain where co-existence takes place. The knowledge of this knowledge constitutes the social imperative for a human-centered ethics' (cited in Escobar, 2008: 17). A deeper journey into the inner self and its relationship with the wider social and natural world has to begin with the opening of the mind, examining and challenging power equations and hierarchies, and the obstacles that resist change.

Education needs to become the means to interrogate domination and exploitation in societies; and a means to develop inner resilience and a sense of social justice. This becomes possible when the educational process is designed as dialogue—between teacher and students and among students—helping students to think and reflect from several perspectives as they engage. Breaking hierarchies between the teacher and the taught helps students to develop capacities of empathic inquiry, critical thinking and a discerning judgement rather than becoming judgemental. In this sense, education needs to be based on a clear conception of the 'true aim of human life, both individual and collective', for the 'individual exists not in himself alone but in the collectivity...the free use of our liberty includes also the liberation of others and of mankind' (Aurobindo, 2002: 14).

4 Learning from the Post-colonial

Struggles grounded in the everyday, such as Dalit⁵ and feminist movements; civil rights and anti-racist movements; and environmental movements that foreground concerns of vulnerable communities, individual dignity and rights, are powerful

⁵ The term Dalit was in use as a translation for the British Raj census classification of Depressed Classes prior to 1935. It was popularised by the economist and reformer, Dr. B. R. Ambedkar (1891–1956), himself a Dalit. Scheduled Castes is the official term for Dalits.

sources of learning. Anti-colonial and anti-caste struggles that tapped the emancipatory potential of education as part of freedom movements demonstrate what transformative education looks like. For instance, recognising the counter-hegemonic nature of a 'modern' system of education, Ambedkar (1891–1956) accorded it central importance in his endeavour to 'overthrow the hierarchical structure and ideology of caste'. Deeply influenced by the philosophy of Gautama Buddha (fifth century BCE), Kabir Das (fifteenth century) and Jyotiba Phule (1827–1890) and his own political struggles, Ambedkar's socio-political thought was rooted in 'social democratic liberalism' (Velaskar, 2012).

Ambedkar was also deeply influenced by Dewey's thoughts on democracy as 'associated living', central to which are ideas of equality, fraternity and mutual respect (Mukherjee, 2009). In Ambedkar's ideas of democracy carefully crafted in Indian Constitution, 'criticality was accorded to a synthesis between individuals, community and society'. For both Phule and Ambedkar, the democratisation of the method of knowing was also critical. This includes seeking the integration of 'the principles of prajna (critical understanding) with Karuna (empathetic love) and samata (equality)' (Rege, 2010: 93). In the Indian context, the key question being glossed over the century-long transition from colonial rule to neoliberal reforms is the question of addressing inequality in and through education. This was the essential epistemic difference that modern education failed to discern and that neoliberal reforms seek to gloss over (Batra, 2020: 5).

The construction of anti-colonial national imaginaries in diverse societies of the global south can provide new discourses of education and compel us to rethink education, its purposes, processes and methods. 'Once we engage in a critical form of listening to the life experiences of subaltern peoples, the decolonisation of consciousness becomes a real possibility...enabling a new social imaginary' as 'knowing is inseparable from being – epistemology is inseparable from ontology' (Kincheloe, 2008: 193, 251). This can help us to view education as a critical site for developing a democratic social order and enable the imagination of transformative pedagogies that can facilitate epistemic justice.

5 Addressing the Anthropocene

A critical question for and in education relates to how the natural environment and habitats of millions of species other than the human are under grave threat and how education could play a role in reversing this trend. Here again, it would be important to examine how education in terms of knowledge, its application and formal arrangements has in the first place contributed to the environmental disasters that human society witnesses. It is critical to understand how the trajectory of (unsustainable) development is sustained through the modern system of education that is being reformed by a neoliberal agenda only to strengthen it further.

Environmentalists have called out the dominance of traditional subject knowledge in schools as 'a legacy of the eighteenth century conception of knowledge...grounded

in the idea of the universal applicability of reason and in the instrumental nature of rationality'. Laying the foundations for a mechanist intellectual framework such knowledge is critiqued to be 'objectified, abstract, absolute and unchanging'. Attention is called to the need to reconstruct educational knowledge. The argument is that our relationship with nature is fundamental to this reconstruction, and that 'direct engagement with the environment...is fundamental to learning, and schools need to be embedded in the local community so that learning tasks can emerge out of real life contexts and both teacher and learner can work together' (Tasker, 2004: 28). This approach was largely ignored by mainstream education that instead focused on the need to change human behaviours to create more sustainable life styles.

Studies however, reveal that 'people with a high level of environmental awareness do not necessarily have a good personal ecological balance sheet. People from poorer backgrounds, on the other hand, who have under-average positive attitudes towards nature, pollute the environment the least'. The plea therefore is that education for sustainability should enable and encourage students 'to question the mechanisms that have created the Anthropocene and make a sustainable Anthropocene conceivable – in this form, it stands in the tradition of enlightenment in the best sense' (Niebert, 2019: 2).

While the cumulative effects of a consumerist lifestyle on the earth's ecosystem has been the focus of climate change activists, there is very little emphasis on 'environmental (in)justice with regards to the unequal distribution of sufferings, such as the thoughtless exploitation of labourers (other humans) for our need for overconsumption...the instrumentalization, reification, and commodification of non-human animals for food production' (Su & Su, 2019: 1). The socio-ecological crisis is therefore, 'not a surface-phenomenon' requiring only a little bit of mending here and there. Rather, it is built into the core of modern culture that needs to be problematised and challenged (Schmidt, 2013: 479).

Problematising the role of education would be critical to envisioning a new role that education must play in addressing the Anthropocene, especially as 'modern science and technology not only contribute to rampant destruction but no longer seem able to devise workable solutions to it. That is why epistemological questions are fundamental in discussing questions about nature' (Escobar, 2008: 8). This compels us to look at cultural roots of informal education⁶—such as the links communities have traditionally had with nature that facilitated civilisations to survive in ecological harmony and how these are seriously threatened by the economic growth model of development. Several theorists questioning Eurocentric universalism are of the view that 'the world we live in is a pluriverse – it is inherently pluralistic. It contains many imperfect worldviews from where many plausible modes of thinking, doing

⁶ 'Informal education' here refers to self-directed learning which is typically part of several communities in India and elsewhere, such as learning among agrarian communities, artisans, weavers and crafts people.

and living can be developed and employed. Self-critical intellectuals have continued to generate many plausible modes of thinking, doing and living from the intellectual heritage of different peoples' (Nweke, 2019). This needs to be at the centre of our efforts to reimagine education.

6 Conclusion

The project of human education is thus a challenge of content as well as pedagogic approaches as these are intertwined in an educational experience. 'Dialogue as education' prompts young people to think critically, resist conformity, question themselves and what is around them with the aim to understand the relationship between knowledge and power; and to develop a sense of agency to challenge these to better their lives and the lives of others. True education is as much about liberating others as oneself, from material shackles and the fetters within—ideas embedded in the educational imagination of Tagore and Gandhi. Aesthetic knowledge, the creative arts and working with the hands foregrounded by several philosophical traditions are central to developing 'sensibilities', and to reimagine education. The notion of the abstract individual, central to traditional Western philosophies needs to be challenged via 'critical ontology with its understanding of the social construction of selfhood and its never ending embrace and respect for others and difference' (Kincheloe, 2008: 251). 'The one-truth ways of seeing and being' embedded in a system of ideas that focus primarily on 'self-centeredness and economic self', will need to be questioned epistemologically and ontologically (ibid.).

Human education would focus on developing capacities for 'being human'—to relate and communicate with each other; empathise; agree to disagree; appreciate difference; develop the ability to listen, observe and act rather than react; resist dogma, question social and gender inequities and reflect on oneself; learn to 'witness' one's own thought and action. David Orr (2004: 20) reminds us that education for some of the most eminent philosophers like Rousseau and Dewey 'had to do with the timeless question of how we are to live. And in our time the great question is how we will live in light of the ecological fact that we are bound together in the community of life, one and indivisible, now threatened by human carelessness'. The current health crisis,⁷ symptomatic of a deeper environmental and social predicament of human civilisation, is a stark reminder that we cannot go about with 'business as usual'. It compels us to look within, to ask difficult questions and to reimagine education to create an environmentally and socially just world.

⁷ COVID-19 Pandemic.

References

- Aurobindo, S. (2002). Letters on Yoga p. 234. Cited in Integral Psychology Sri Aurobindo Ashram Trust, 14.
- Batra, P. (2005). Voice and agency of teachers: Missing link in national curriculum framework 2005. *Economic and Political Weekly*, 4347–4356.
- Batra, P. (2014). Problematising teacher education practice in India: Developing a research agenda. *Education as Change*, 18(sup1), S5–S18.
- Batra, P. (2019). Comparative education in South Asia: Contribution, contestation, and possibilities. *Comparative and international education: Survey of an infinite field* (International Perspectives on Education and Society, Vol. 36, pp. 183–211). Emerald Publishing Limited.
- Batra, P. (2020). Echoes of ‘coloniality’ in the episteme of Indian educational reforms. on education. *Journal for Research and Debate*, 3(7). https://doi.org/10.17899/on_ed.2020.7.4
- Dewey, J. (1938/1948). *Experience and education*. Macmillan.
- Escobar, A. (2008). *Territories of difference: Place, movements, life*. Duke University Press.
- Kincheloe, J. L. (2008). *Knowledge and critical pedagogy: An introduction* (Vol. 1). Springer Science & Business Media.
- Kumar, K. (2005). *Political agenda of education: A study of colonialist and nationalist ideas*. Sage Publications India.
- Mukherjee, A. P. (2009). BR Ambedkar, John Dewey, and the meaning of democracy. *New Literary History*, 40(2), 345–370.
- Niebert, K. (2019). Effective sustainability education is political education. On education. *Journal for Research and Debate*, 2(4). Accessed on 5 April, 2020. https://doi.org/10.17899/on_ed.2019.4.5
- Nweke, V. (2019, May 3). *What is wrong with the foundations of education in a pluriverse? A personal account*. Convivial Thinking. Accessed on 5 April, 2020. <https://www.convivialthinking.org/index.php/2019/05/03/what-is-wrong-with-the-foundations-of-education-in-a-pluriverse-a-personal-account/>
- Orr, D. (2004, September/October). *The learning curve: All education is environmental education* (Resurgence, No. 226), 18–20.
- Pinar, W. F. (2015). *Curriculum studies in India: Intellectual histories and present circumstances*. Palgrave Macmillan.
- Rege, S. (2010). Education as Trutiya Ratna: Towards Phule-Ambedkarite feminist pedagogical practice. *Economic and Political Weekly*, 45(40), 88–98.
- Schmidt, J. C. (2013). Defending Hans Jonas’ environmental ethics: On the relation between philosophy of nature and ethic. *Environmental Ethics*, 35(4), 461–479.
- Su, H., & Su, S. (2019). Why solving intergenerational injustice through education does not work: On education. *Journal for Research and Debate*, 2(4). Accessed on 5 April, 2020. https://doi.org/10.17899/on_ed.2019.4.3
- Tasker, M. (2004, September/October). *Listening culture: What can schools do to develop a new theory of knowledge?* (Resurgence, No. 226), 28–29.
- Velaskar, P. (2012). Education for liberation: Ambedkar’s thought and Dalit women’s perspectives. *Contemporary Education Dialogue*, 9(2), 245–272.

Poonam Batra is Professor of Education, formerly with the Central Institute of Education, University of Delhi, India. Major areas of professional focus include public policy in education; curriculum and pedagogy; social psychology of education, teacher education and gender studies. Professor Batra has co-authored several key education policy documents in India. Her recent research examines the imperatives of comparative education from a South Asian perspective, and the politics of school and teacher education reform. She is currently working as Co-I on

Transforming Education Systems for Sustainable Development (TES4SD) Network Plus Project, funded by the Global Challenges Research Fund (GCRF) of UK Research and Innovation.