Protect education for the common good



Education is both an individual and collective right. It gives every person an opportunity to acquire the knowledge and skills needed for a meaningful life. It is also a nation's most precious tool to achieve economic growth, social progress and democratic development.

Education is a basic social service and one of the cornerstones of democracy. It is one of the core responsibilities of governments to facilitate the delivery of quality education by building and funding strong public school systems.

Over 95 per cent of Finnish children and youth attend public schools. Citizenship and human rights form the overarching values that underpin all education and the school culture in Finland and are embedded in the national curriculum.

Basic education promotes responsibility, sense of community, respect for the rights of others and freedom of the individual; it helps students obtain the knowledge and skills they need in life, for further study and as engaged citizens in order to develop a democratic society (Council of Europe, 2014, p. 18).

The globalisation of our economies, the need to successfully compete in global markets, and the crucial role our school systems play in responding to that need, have propelled education to the very top of the international agenda. There are reasons to be pleased about the interest shown in education, but if investments in our school systems are solely or predominantly driven by the desire to boost our economies and to satisfy markets, we need to be cautious.

Education is a common good. It is not just an instrument to promote economic growth. It is not a commodity. The values of public education are essentially the values that underpin democracy, as well as our prosperity.

They encompass the principles of equity and equal opportunities, of non-discrimination and social justice. They embrace collective needs, as well as individual liberty, solidarity as well as opportunity.

In this regard, it is interesting to note that in the past three decades the education agenda has not been set by the organisation that was established for that very purpose, UNESCO (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation), but by the World Bank, the largest source of education loans, and by the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), one of the most influential policy advisors for industrial countries.

International human rights legal documents establish the right of every person to education.*

The broad mandate to education is directly related to the contribution of education to democracy.

Education is not limited to the basics. It goes beyond the skills needed for employment to include the competencies, skills and aptitudes needed for life.

The United Nations International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (1976) states:

Education shall be directed to the full development of the human personality and the sense of its dignity, and shall

strengthen the respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms … Education shall enable all persons to participate effectively in a free society, promote understanding, tolerance and friendship among all nations and all racial, ethnic or religious groups.

The notion of education as a public good, as opposed to an economic good, spread rapidly in the decades following the Second World War.

However, a discussion evolved within UNESCO as to how to approach the delivery of education through private support. UNESCO suggested approaching schooling as a common good, rather than only a public good, with the understanding that all schooling is a “collective endeavour from a humanistic perspective” (Daviet, 2016, p.1). It is clear that “good” in neither expression is intended to treat schooling as something that is “for sale”.

Whether delivered through public or private mechanisms, public or common goods are a sacred, if secular, charge for public authorities. Education is to be available for all. Nobody is excluded or shut out. That, by itself, makes it crucial to democracy.

* 71 governments have ratified the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (1976) and all but one State has ratified the Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989). Both treaties affirm the right to education.

The above text is an excerpt from *On Education & Democracy* (2019) by Susan Hopgood and Fred van Leeuwen. The book contains 25 lessons from the teaching profession for educators. This is one of six lessons that have been identified by the SSTUWA as a key organisational objective following November State Council Conference 2019. This article has been edited for clarity and brevity. The full article and book can be read at: bit.ly/2w4kNvW

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