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# Humanism and democracy in comparative education

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## ABSTRACT

This article argues that contemporary education policies promoted by UNESCO and the OECD are embracing two distinct post-humanist visions, which I call the 'sustainable futures' and the 'techno-solutionist' strand. I will relate these strands to two conflicting agendas of education after World War II: the humanistic-emancipatory perspective represented by UNESCO, and the 'economics of education' movement, which was dominant in the OECD. I argue that comparative education scholars would be well advised to draw on the humanistic and democratic traditions of the field in critically analysing the range of promissory visions and master narratives that have emerged recently which carry de-humanising tendencies and represent a challenge to democracy.

## KEYWORDS

Comparative education; humanism; democracy; post-humanism; UNESCO; OECD; sustainable futures; techno-solutionism; skills

## Introduction

It is the general argument of this article that comparative education scholars should critically analyse the diffusion of global policies by international organisations such as the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) and the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), which have played a key role in the reconstruction of education after World War II. International organisations represent 'modes of *imperium*' (Cowen 2018, 212) – political, economic and social expressions of power – that greatly contribute to shaping our 'educated identity' (Cowen 2021; Klerides and Carney 2021). This article will critically reflect on two contemporary policy trends promoted by international organisations, which I will call the 'sustainable futures' and the 'techno-solutionist' strand. I will trace these strands back to previous policy ideas promoted by UNESCO and the OECD. Although both of these visions of our 'educated identity' are couched in humanistic terms, I will argue that they are at odds with the principles of humanism and democracy that have guided much of the scholarship in the field of comparative education since its emergence.

My use of the term humanism refers to the idea that education should contribute to the fulfilment of individual potential and empowerment – and therefore to the betterment of human lives. My use of the term democracy refers to the Western liberal idea of a political system based on lawful institutions and human rights that guarantees

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individual freedom and provides ‘the conditions that make it possible for ordinary people to better their lives by becoming political beings and by making power responsive to their hopes and needs’ (Wolin 2017, 260). Democracy is strongly related to humanism in its commitment to the participation of citizens in the shaping of their societies, to humans having the right to live self-determined lives, and to the mitigation of societal inequalities. Both of these concepts are indebted to the enlightenment tradition of rationalism, individual freedom and human dignity, which is a fundamental constitutional right in many democratic societies and international normative documents. These ideas are deeply entrenched in the history of educational thought and are reflected in our pedagogical commitment to critical consciousness (Dewey 1916/1966; Ulich 1938; Freire 1970 [2005]). In the past few decades, an epistemological shift has emerged, represented by a post-humanist movement that rejects human exceptionalism and emphasises the interdependence and entanglements between humans, animals, the environment and machines (Blaikie, Daigle, and Vasseur 2020; Snaza and Weaver 2015). While many arguments of the post-humanist movement are useful and important, I will argue that the ‘sustainable futures’ and the ‘techno-solutionist’ strand currently promoted by international organisations carry de-humanising tendencies and represent a challenge to democracy. As Freire (1970 [2005]) has noted, we need to be wary of ‘humanitarianism’ as ‘an instrument of dehumanization’ (54).

This paper will make a conceptual distinction between the visions promoted by international organisations and other policy-related bodies, and the critical analysis of these visions by comparative education scholars. Cowen’s (2014) distinction between ‘solutions-comparative-education’ – universal approaches to and tools of comparative education promoted by international organisations – and *academic* comparative education – scholarly conceptualizations, reflective theorisation and critical analysis of comparative education – is useful in that regard. There are, however, in practice, cross-fertilizations between academic comparative education and ‘solutions-comparative-education’, and the lines between these two fields are blurred. Comparative education scholars have been involved in creating the visions of ‘solutions-comparative-education’ – many of the UNESCO and OECD policy reports I will refer to in this paper have been written by academics – and these visions have also influenced comparative education as an academic field. However, the distinction is important as it is academic comparative education’s task to critically engage with and analyse the ‘modes of *imperium*’ that international organisations represent.

I will argue in this paper that contemporary policies promoted by international organisations are moving away from humanistic and democratic definitions of ‘educated identity’ and are embracing post-humanist and technicist visions, which are of course reflections of broader societal trends and developments. I will focus on UNESCO and the OECD, two international organisations that are considered key proponents of ‘solutions-comparative-education’, and I will discuss two expressions of this ‘post-humanist’ movement. The first is driven by concerns about building a sustainable future, and underpinned by a de-colonial and anti-anthropocentric stance. The second could be labelled ‘techno-solutionism’, characterised by the promotion of digitisation, neurosciences and ‘twenty-first century skills’ (Black 2021). Both of these strands can be found in UNESCO, the first, for example, in the 2021 ‘Futures of Education’ report, and the second in the ‘Reimagining Education’ report, published in March 2022 by UNESCO’s Mahatma

Gandhi Institute of Education for Peace and Sustainable Development (MGEIP), and UNESCO's 'Global Education Coalition', launched in 2020 as a response to Covid. The techno-solutionist strand is also prominent in the OECD, most notably in its engagement with neurosciences and social and emotional learning (SEL) (Kuhl et al. 2019; OECD 2022). These strands, despite their different ontological underpinnings, share two common characteristics: they invoke a sense of emergency, and they avoid political debate.

I will relate both of these strands to two conflicting agendas that characterised the thinking about education after World War II: one was influenced by idealistic-humanistic traditions, strongly committed to democracy and emancipatory ideas such as 'lifelong education', which was promoted by UNESCO. The other represented a more utilitarian planning approach based on scientific principles, drawing from the 'economics of education' movement (Vaizey 1962) that took hold in the OECD.<sup>1</sup> Kazamias (2009) has referred to these two traditions as the 'historical-philosophical-humanistic and the social scientific *episteme*' (1267). While in the first decades after World War II connections existed between these two lines of thought – as represented by the paradigm of 'scientific humanism' (Lauwerys 1957; Faure 1972), since the rise of neoliberalism in the late 1970s, the utilitarian approach has arguably crowded out the humanistic perspective (Elfert 2018).

The paper is structured as follows: The first section will briefly revisit the tradition of humanism and democracy in 'academic' comparative education. The second section will identify two distinct contemporary trends in the visions of international organisations: the 'sustainable futures' and the 'techno-solutionist', and trace them back to global policy movements promoted by UNESCO and the OECD in the past. In the third section I will offer a discussion of the de-humanising tendencies and potential challenges to democracy that the two strands represent. I will conclude by reiterating my argument that comparative education scholars would be well advised to draw on the humanistic and democratic traditions of the field to subject these educational visions to a historical and structural analysis.

## Humanism and democracy in academic comparative education

In the idealist post-war period, comparative educators such as Joseph Lauwerys considered 'democracy as the only humane, reasonable and productive way of organising society' (Holmes 1982, 61). Under the impact of the Second World War and the Holocaust, the role of education and schooling for the realisation of democratic ideals was a dominant theme, often tied to moral and religious principles, as in the work of the German comparativist Friedrich Schneider (1952). These pioneers believed in the role of education for societal change – their aspiration towards the democratisation of society was apparent in their commitment to a holistic education, the 'true concept of humanism' (Kandel 1948, 234) and the pursuit of international exchange and collaboration, exemplified by the creation of the Comparative Education Societies, such as the Comparative Education Society in Europe (CESE).

A later generation of comparative education scholarship examined the social reproductive nature of education and the contributions of schooling and education to social inequalities. Some of the proponents of this line of scholarship that had a major influence on comparative education can be situated in the tradition of radical humanism, most prominently represented by Paulo Freire (Novóia 2011), who continues to inspire

critical theorists guided by a strong social justice orientation, many of whom are influenced by the Latin American radical and popular education tradition (Finger and Asún 2001; Torres and Noguera 2008; Tarlau 2019). Through the lens of class conflict and distributive justice, comparativists explored the role of education and schools in the tension between democratic and egalitarian political principles and the hierarchical, restrictive and social reproductive structure of the capitalist economy (Carnoy and Levin 1985; Connell 1993). The ‘yawning chasm between individualistic capitalism and democracy’ (Jones 1998, 146) raised concerns about the implications of inequality for the democratic foundations of society. Much of this literature critically engaged with the impact of neoliberalism, globalisation and marketisation on educational inequalities (Klees 2020; Carney 2006). More recent trends in comparative education scholarship address the increasing standardisation, datafication, accountability and disciplining of educational institutions and teachers that undermine the democratic potential of schools and higher education institutions (Williamson, Bayne, and Shay 2020; Holloway and Larsen Hedegaard 2021) and explore ways of democratising education technologies and artificial intelligence (Thompson et al. 2022).

Aspiring ‘to create more peaceful, just and democratic futures’ (Griffiths and Arnove 2015, 90), comparativists have engaged with theoretical perspectives such as world systems and world culture approaches, examining the convergence and homogenisation of norms and practices through processes of globalisation (Meyer and Ramirez 2000). Jones (1998) distinguished between the logic of globalisation in terms of the global marketplace and internationalism ‘with its intrinsically democratic foundation’ (143) in terms of its aspiration towards global peace through the development of international structures such as intergovernmental organisations, and collaboration on intellectual issues (see also Arnove 2002). The fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 gave a new impetus to discussions about democracy. Significantly, the 8th World Congress of Comparative Education, organised under the auspices of the World Council of Comparative Education Societies, held in 1992 in Prague, was held under the theme ‘Education and Democracy’ (WCCES 2022). In November 1996, the *Comparative Education Review* published a special issue on Democratization.

Overall, comparative education looks back at a long history of commitment to humanism and democracy. Democratic aspirations, concern about inequalities and the defense of the emancipatory tradition of education are inherent in the work of scholars associated with this field. Comparative education scholars should therefore be concerned about the current post-humanist trends in the educational visions of UNESCO and the OECD that I will discuss in the next section.

## **Current ‘post-humanist’ discourses promoted by UNESCO and the OECD and their predecessors**

### ***The ‘sustainable futures’ strand***

In recent years, a post-humanist discourse has emerged in education. Two major streams of this ‘post-humanist’ movement are notable. The first is driven by environmental concerns and a decolonial, anti-globalisation and anti-anthropocentric stance. As it is related to the Sustainable Development Goals, in particular SDG 4.7. on ‘Education for

Sustainable Development and Global Citizenship’, I will label it the ‘sustainable futures’ strand. The second could be labelled ‘techno-solutionism’, characterised by the promotion of digitisation, neurosciences and ‘twenty-first century skills’ (Black 2021).

In academic comparative education, the prominence of the ‘sustainable futures’ strand is illustrated by the theme of the 2020 conference of the Comparative and International Education Society (CIES), ‘Education beyond the human’ (see also Takayama, Sriprakash, and Connell 2016). Maybe the most prominent recent example of this strand in the field of ‘solutions-comparative-education’ is the report *Reimagining Our Futures Together: A New Social Contract for Education* (hereafter *Reimagining Our Futures Report*) launched in November 2021 as the main output of UNESCO’s ‘Futures of Education’ initiative (UNESCO 2021). The report challenges the impact of the tenets of neoliberalism on education and a range of factors that have accelerated over the last three decades, such as climate change, new technologies, the rise of populist nationalisms and pandemics. It takes the position that education is a public good and argues that we need to ‘radically change course’ and re-organize all aspects of education if we want to secure a sustainable future on this planet. To achieve this radical reorganisation, the report calls for a new ‘social contract’ for education.

### **UNESCO’s humanistic vision of education**

To some extent the report stays in the humanistic tradition of UNESCO, which is anchored in its constitution and reflected in the organisation’s engagement with universal humanist ideas such as the concept of lifelong education (Elfert 2018; Mundy 1999). One of the factors that drove UNESCO’s work on lifelong education since the 1960s was the idea that ‘few of us ever reach our intellectual or spiritual limits’ (UNESCO 1961, 10). The questions asked and themes discussed at an international meeting of experts on adult education held at the UNESCO Institute for Education in 1960, included, ‘How free are workers actually?’, ‘What possibilities exist for the development of the adult’s personality?’, ‘Development of political responsibility’, and ‘Industrial workers’ participation in cultural activities’ (UNESCO Institute for Education 1960). In the view of Paul Lengrand (1970), the main theorist of lifelong education in UNESCO in the 1960s and 1970s, the concept stood for a questioning of the traditional conservative education system that ‘paralyses innovation’ (28) and socialises docile subjects. The purpose of education, according to Lengrand, was to create the ‘questioning spirit’ (ibid.). The emancipatory and humanistic perspective expressed by these themes is a far cry from the reductionist discourses of employability skills that have dominated education policies since the 1980s.

UNESCO’s concept of lifelong education emphasised the perspective of ‘an integrated whole,’ including formal, non-formal and informal learning (Wain 1987, 41), encompassing all age groups. It basically stood for a transformation of learning and society – which is why Cropley (1979) referred to it as the ‘maximalist’ vision of lifelong education, most strongly represented by UNESCO’s 1972 report *Learning to be: The world of education today and tomorrow*, otherwise known as the *Faure Report*. The *Faure Report* represents UNESCO’s tradition of ‘scientific humanism’, a humanist outlook combined with an unwavering trust in science, rationality and progress. It recommended lifelong education as the global ‘master concept’ for education and put forth the vision of the ‘learning society’ in which ‘democratization is the main driver’ (Biesta 2011, 64) of learning, marking a shift

from the emphasis on schooling to a broader perspective including less traditional pillars of education such as non-formal and informal education (Field 2001). The *Faure Report* is rooted in an Enlightenment conception of 'the complete man' [sic!], a notion that stands for a human being enlightened by active participation in a 'learning society', an individual who has 'learned to be' in this world. The report viewed as the 'fundamental aim of education ... the physical, intellectual, emotional and ethical integration of the individual' (Faure 1972, 156). Characteristic of UNESCO's universalism, the *Faure Report* put forward a universal view of a 'common humanity' with a 'common calling.' (157). It is important to note that the *Faure Report* and the lifelong education movement more broadly were also influenced to some extent by the African and Latin American liberation movements that made themselves visible in UNESCO (Finger and Asún 2001; Zimmer n.d.). Under the influence of 'deschooling' theorists such as Ivan Illich and Paulo Freire's liberation pedagogy – both Illich and Freire provided background papers to the *Faure Report* – the concept of lifelong education stood for a democratisation of education characterised by ideas about free access to learning, the creation of cooperative learning sites, an emphasis on non-formal education and involvement of learners in the provision and organisation of education and learning, that influenced education reform projects in many countries.

However, by the end of the 1970s the interest in lifelong education faded. Ultimately, the influence of the *Faure Report* on policies was very limited (Elfert 2018). The oil and economic crisis of the 1970s led to greater austerity, and by the 1980s the political and economic climate had changed, resulting in the rise of neoliberalism and more conservative policies, in which equality issues took a back seat. Although UNESCO's 1996 report *Learning: The Treasure Within* (aka the *Delors Report*) brought the humanistic lifelong learning perspective back on the agenda, the economic approach to education prevailed over the lifelong education movement.

To some extent the *Reimagining Our Futures Report* maintains the humanistic orientation of UNESCO's educational vision, as represented by the 1972 *Faure report* and the 1996 *Delors report* – and also the 2015 report *Rethinking Education* (UNESCO 2015a) – to which the report refers. However, it represents a different form of humanism. Both the *Faure Report* and *Delors Report* were situated in UNESCO's tradition of 'scientific humanism' in that they reflected a strong belief in rationalism and progress, universal values, and a concept of human beings as masters of their own destiny (Elfert 2018). The *Reimagining Our Futures Report* reframes humanism from a more planetary and less anthropocentric perspective, more oriented towards the survival of humanity in the abstract rather than on the empowerment of citizens, which was a central concern of the *Faure Report*. Along these lines, another recent UNESCO working paper, published in the *Education Research and Foresight Series* and written by a group of academics, calls for 'a complete paradigm shift' in order to secure the survival of our species and the planet and declares 'the need for a fundamental break with humanist education' (Common Worlds Research Collective 2020, 8). This represents a radical departure from the emancipatory vision of UNESCO's humanism.

In contrast to the two previous reports, which placed strong emphasis on democracy, the *Reimagining Our Futures Report* is much less outspoken about its political vision. Although the 'social contract' is a central idea of the report, it is not very specific about the parties to the contract and avoids addressing the political stance inherent in the

notion of the social contract. Even more strikingly, the report avoids any analysis of power, in terms of who shapes educational discourses and technologies, who benefits and who profits from them (Elfert and Morris 2022). It appears strictly utopian as it presents us with a beautiful vision of how we should be living on this planet, but without any analysis of how we can overcome the structural obstacles towards that vision.

### **The ‘techno-solutionist’ strand**

The ‘techno-solutionist’ strand is prevalent in the OECD’s ‘science of learning’ discourse that emphasises the importance of enhancing the understanding of human learning by drawing on scientific evidence from ‘well-established disciplines, such as cognitive psychology, and social and behavioural sciences, and also neuroscience, brain research, computer science and even engineering’ (Kuhl et al. 2019, 3). With its survey on Social and Emotional Skills, the OECD extends its claim to the scientific measurement of cognitive skills of the PISA study to ‘soft’ non-cognitive skills, in a problematic attempt to subject the processes of human learning to scientific measurement (Williamson 2021).

A UNESCO example of the techno-solutionist strand is the report *Reimagining Education*, produced by UNESCO’s Mahatma Gandhi Institute of Education for Peace and Sustainable Development (MGIEP) and launched in March 2022 as a contribution to UNESCO’s Futures of Education initiative. This report presents the findings of an initiative called ‘The International Science and Evidence based Education Assessment (ISEE Assessment)’, defined as taking a ‘transdisciplinary approach drawing on science and evidence’ (UNESCO MGIEP 2022a, 7). While the report offers a variety of perspectives, including humanistic ones, especially the ‘Summary for Decision-Makers’ and the ‘Headliners’ of the *Reimagining Education* Report emphasise a ‘whole-brain learner-centric approach’ that ‘strengthens the interconnectedness of cognition and the social-emotional domains, which is essential for human flourishing’. Although the report frames these discourses as ‘an entitlement and human right for every learner’ and a way to move away ‘from credentialism and meritocracy’, it promotes visions that advance the commercial interests of edtech companies, such as the call to ‘introduce early universal screening’ and create ‘a global database to facilitate personalized learning experiences for all learners across the world’ (UNESCO MGIEP 2022b, 6). The rationale for these approaches is presented in terms of the uncertain, rapidly changing and crisis-prone context in which we live – ‘a growing recognition that the future is, to a significant degree, uncontrollable, unpredictable and risky’ (43) –, which makes it necessary to move beyond ‘job ready’ skills and ‘include skills such as emotional resilience, empathy and compassion’ (Foreword, p. 5).

Another example of the ‘techno-solutionist’ strand in UNESCO is the ‘Global Education Coalition’, launched at the beginning of the Covid crisis under the hashtag #LearningNeverStops, representing a network of 175 members, including other UN organisations, NGOs, civil society, academia and the private sector, that focuses on digital learning. As stated by Shultz and Viczko (2021), this coalition promotes ‘technologies of saving’:

The power of this knowledge to discursively render children as objects in their communities, constructing them as assets to be managed against checklists, guidelines and hashtags, is



concerning. Being saved by digital technology provided by Google, Microsoft, Zoom and other giant global corporations overshadows the role that families and communities play in the education of children. (235)

Emphasising 'resilience' as a key skill in the face of crisis, one of the members of the Global Education Coalition, the Global Business Coalition for Education, has issued a report on 'Resilience: A New Youth Skill for the 4<sup>th</sup> Industrial Revolution', inspired by the World Economic Forum's transhumanist vision of the future (Global Business Coalition for Education 2020). The 'Global Skills Academy', which is another UNESCO initiative launched in the context of the Global Education Coalition, aims to 'help one million young people build skills for employability and resilience' (Global Skills Academy n.d.). Uncritically adopting the World Economic Forum's (WEF) discourse of the '4<sup>th</sup> industrial revolution', the 2021 report of the partners' meeting of the Global Skills Academy states:

In early 2020, before the COVID-19 outbreak, the WEF expected that 1 billion workers would need to reskill by 2030 while by 2022, 42% of core skills required to perform existing jobs were expected to change. Indeed, the 4th industrial revolution was already transforming jobs and the resulting skills demand at an ever-increasing pace; the pandemic merely exacerbated the urging need to upskill and reskill the workforce. (Global Skills Academy 2021, 7)

In a similar vein, Andreas Schleicher, Director of the Directorate of Education and Skills at the OECD, recently emphasised the importance of skills in the age of automation and artificial intelligence, in order for human beings not to be replaced by robots:

The bottom line is, if we want to stay ahead of technological developments, we have to find and refine the qualities that are unique to our humanity, and that complement, not compete with, capacities we have created in our computers, schools need to develop first class humans, not second-class robots (quoted in Watson 2021; see also OECD 2019; Schleicher 2022).

Andreas Schleicher's comment about the 'first class humans' illustrates the current drive towards technology-enhanced learning, 'the collaboration between machines and humans' (OECD 2022),<sup>2</sup> and the emerging embrace of neuro-scientific and social and emotional learning by international organisations that takes the neoliberal individualised learner even further towards a 'robotic view' (Vickers 2022, 14). The above quote represents a post-humanist vision of a human who is forced to learn for survival, competing with robots in a society shaped by the rise of artificial intelligence and automation (Williamson 2021). The emerging post-humanist vision of the future is accompanied by a move towards neurosciences and digitisation, coupled with discourses of crisis, resilience and the 4<sup>th</sup> industrial revolution, which represents a case of Orwellian 'doublespeak' as it embellishes the massive loss of jobs due to automation and artificial intelligence. This development points to a shift from the neoliberal discourse of skills for employability, productivity and economic growth, towards a discourse of skills driven by crisis, survival and rapid digitisation. It is implicit in this vision that it concerns only the few, those 'world class humans' who are endowed with the social, emotional and technological skills that make them resilient enough to prevail in this new crisis-ridden and digitised world, in which human beings, as represented on the images that illustrate the *Reimagining Education* Report, are alone and deprived of real human interactions, not anymore part of a family, community or society, but merged with technology. While the overall message of the *Reimagining*

*Education* Report is that meritocracy needs to be replaced, it is hard to see the ‘whole brain approach’ (UNESCO MGIEP 2022a, 69) not leading to further divisions and inequalities in society and increased competition among learners.

### ***The ‘economics of education’ movement***

The claim that only scientific evidence can free education from the ‘myths and erroneous ideas, born out of romantic ideals, wishful thinking or love for children’ (Schleicher 2019, 5) can be traced back to the scientific fervour of the educational planners and the ‘economics of education’ movement that gained momentum in government circles, universities and international organisations in the 1960s. That decade, characterised as the ‘extraordinary decade of educational euphoria’ (Coombs 1992, 33), yielded a new group of economists who believed that ‘the fight for education was too important to be left solely to the educators’ (Walter W. Heller, Chair of the US Council of Economic Advisers, cited in OECD 1961). Trained in the new fields of educational planning, economics of education and comparative education, their professional ethos was strongly shaped by the newly created international organisations and the influence of the United States, where many of the new rate of return to educational investment studies emerged. Their findings were then spread to the ‘Third World’ and to Europe by way of new institutions of global governance, such as the OEEC, the precursor of the OECD which was created to administer the Marshall Plan (Elfert 2020). Within the OEEC/OECD, the European Productivity Agency (EPA) and the Study Group of Economics, which was particularly active between 1962 and 1965, played an important role in promoting education as an investment in productivity (Bürgi 2017). Also the OECD’s Mediterranean Regional Project (MRP) was instrumental in promoting the expansion of education systems to poorer countries, in particular to Latin America, guided by the human capital approach, which emphasised education as an economic investment. Human capital theory fitted neatly into the political and intellectual climate characterised by Cold War tensions, the pursuit of economic growth and a rationalistic approach to social engineering and planning.

The educational planning approach was also influential in UNESCO in the 1960s, which early on had an educational planning and statistics division. It underpinned the regional conferences held by UNESCO on four continents and the organisation’s cooperation with the World Bank in the Cooperative Program, which was launched in 1964 in order to assist the World Bank in the preparation and implementation of its educational loans to developing countries (Elfert 2021). However, the planning approach was soon outsourced to the International Institute for Educational Planning (IIEP) that was created in 1963 as a UNESCO Institute with support by the World Bank and the Ford Foundation, while in UNESCO the influence of the lifelong education movement prevailed.

The planning approach gained prominence as the universal remedy to steer future societal processes towards established goals, in what was claimed to be rational procedures. It entailed the deployment of a whole arsenal of statistical and social science methods to collect information as a basis for decision-making processes. In the context of the shift towards neoliberal governance in the 1980s, measurement agendas gained prominence, illustrated by the push for indicators for education in the OECD, which yielded the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA). The indicators

approach was output-oriented and had strong connections to systems analysis, 'US-inspired organizational theories' and 'programme budgeting' (Eide 1990, 35). PISA has arguably narrowed the common sense of what good education represents (Gorur 2016), foregrounding standardisation, competition, an emphasis on core subjects that allow for the measurement of learning outcomes, corporate-style principles in education, and test-based accountability policies (Sahlberg 2016).

The measurement approach has also underpinned global development agendas, from the first United Nations Development Decade in the 1960s to the contemporary framework of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). SDG 4, the education goal, is characterised by a ramping up of measuring and monitoring of learning outcomes, subjecting all aspects of learning to increasingly intense measurement (Bandola-Gill, Grek, and Tichenor 2022). However, despite the rhetoric of 'country ownership', global agendas such as Education for All, the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) and the SDGs have a homogenising effect on education policies and represent a politics of conversion (Auld, Rapple, and Morris 2019; Elfert and Ydesen *Forthcoming*, 2023). As argued by Saith (2006), 'issues pertaining to the lack of any serious forms of democracy in international arenas of political, economic, environmental, security related decision making are as absent as the voices of the poorer countries in these processes' (1187).

The utilitarian skills agenda, the focus on measurable results, and the marginalisation of the broader lifelong learning perspective point to the displacement of democracy in educational discourses. The very idea of democracy that was so central to the lifelong learning agenda of the first generation, has up to now been largely absent in the contemporary SDG 4 debates. Elsewhere, I noted 'the glaring absence of the word 'democracy' in the 17 SDGs' (Elfert 2019, 549). This trend has been exacerbated by the shift from the enlightened, self-determined learner who actively participates in society – the 'complete man' [sic!] of the *Faure Report* – to the neoliberal individualised learner who is trapped in an endless circle of training and skills acquisition, as predicted by the school critics of the 1960s/70s (Illich and Verne 1976), who had anticipated that the institutionalised school system aimed at creating workers for the economy stood in the way of true learning. Given contemporary discourses of rampant technologization and artificial intelligence that will require ever faster 'reskilling' (World Economic Forum 2018), the emancipatory and democratising vision of the lifelong learning movement seems as far away as ever.

## **De-humanising and anti-democratic shifts in contemporary educational discourses**

While the two 'post-humanist' strands – the 'sustainable futures' and the 'techno-solutionist' – derive from different traditions, they share two key common characteristics: first, they invoke a state of emergency and crisis. The *Reimagining Our Futures Report* exudes a sense of urgency as it sees 'our humanity and planet Earth under threat' and claims that we need a new beginning. The first paragraph of the introduction to the *Reimagining Education Report* also paints the picture of a world in crisis, threatened by climate change, 'unprecedented biodiversity [and] changes in our food and life support systems, the breakdown of our social systems, growing inequality, fragile economic systems, job uncertainty, and ... increasing levels of stress, anxiety, depression, and suicide' (15).

Both of these reports see our world 'at a turning point' (UNESCO 2021, 1) and call for urgent action to 'reimagine education' in order to save the world.

Second, notwithstanding their dire analysis of the state of the world, both of these strands avoid political debate in terms of a structural analysis of power. Instead of challenging the political order and governance that got us into this mess, the *Reimagining Our Futures* Report, which represents the 'sustainable futures' strand, eschews structural questions by describing a utopia that is not grounded in reality. Paulo Freire reminded us that education for freedom requires a critical analysis: 'I cannot denounce an oppressing structure if I do not penetrate into it and know it' (Freire 1976, cited in Webb 2012, 602). Auld (2016, drawing on Voegelin 1952), writes about the 'aspiration of global governance, the obsession of replacing the world of reality by the transfigured dream world' (212). The *Reimagining Education* Report, which represents the 'techno-solutionist' strand, is not interested in political debate as it adheres to a dehumanised vision of the world, described by Jacques Ellul in his book *The Technological Society* as a society in which 'technique enters into every area of life' (Ellul 1964, 6). Although the report refers to events that 'have shaken lives across the world: 9/11, the financial crisis of 2007–2008, the COVID-19 pandemic, the escalation of populism and attacks on democracy ...', the 'comprehension of issues such as brain plasticity and development, mental and physical health' (UNESCO MGIEP 2022a, 47) is considered more important for human flourishing than fixing politics.

The post-humanist discourse that is emerging here marks a clear departure from the previous neoliberal discourse. Politics are not anymore subjected to the dictates of capital and the management of the economy, but to the permanent state of economic, environmental and social emergency and 'shock' (OECD 2022). Both the 'sustainable futures' and the 'techno-solutionist' strand, I would argue, represent a challenge to democracy. While the 'sustainable futures' vision is certainly more benign as it offers a utopian humanistic vision of collectiveness and the 'global common good' as a response to the permanent crisis, it resorts to utopian thinking rather than focusing on a critical analysis of how we can take action to change the political structures and power relationships that led to this historical juncture. The 'techno-solutionist' strand offers dehumanising fantasies of a society in which humans are synched with technology, 'privileging ... biological or neuropsychological explanations for complex global problems' (Bryan 2022, 11). In both strands, painting the picture of a world in crisis and at a turning point bears the risk that the fight for freedom and equality will take second place to the struggle for survival and that supposedly higher collective ideals such as sustainability and safety may be abused to curtail human rights. As Hannah Arendt (1951/1973) has observed, 'fear and the impotence from which fear springs are antipolitical principles and throw men into a situation contrary to political action' (478).

In the 'sustainable futures' strand, the emancipatory conception of the citizen as an agent of change as represented by the *Faure Report*, is being replaced by an abstract collective and by the concept of 'global citizenship', which has been promoted by UNESCO in recent years (UNESCO 2015b, 2016) and which has seen a boost since its inclusion in SDG 4.7. (UNESCO 2021, 52). This shift of focus from the individual citizen of a nation state to a collective abstract notion of citizenship raises questions about who is the subject of justice and which institutions are responsible and can be held accountable for guaranteeing it. The abstract notion of 'global citizenship' could have potentially far reaching consequences for the distribution of wealth and opportunities for education, as well as other

social programmes. In conjunction with the apolitical nature of the current discourse, I would argue that it represents a potentially dangerous development from a social justice perspective. In the 'techno-solutionist' strand, the citizen of the *Faure Report* is replaced by an individual whose utility must be optimised for a performance-enhanced society (European Parliament 2007; Coenen 2008), which follows in the footsteps of the neoliberal competitive knowledge society. These developments have been accelerated by the Covid crisis. Along similar lines as Shultz and Viczko's critique of the unidimensional 'technologies of saving' that international organisations have provided as the response to the crisis, Milan (2020) has examined the dominance of technocratic standardised approaches in governments' handling of the pandemic, 'rooted in a distorted idea of a "standard human"' (1). She discusses the uni-dimensional 'risk reduction technical solutions' (4) such as facial recognition technology, contact tracing apps and digital IDs, that have been provided by governments, and argues that these responses represent 'a limited, exclusionary version of the "standard human" that is grounded on Silicon Valley-inspired "myths"' (4) that stand in sharp contrast to decolonial visions of a pluriversal world. These technological solutions are geared towards wealthy individuals equipped with the latest technology and technological know-how, excluding marginalised communities.

Relating these contemporary tendencies towards the vision of a de-politicized, unidimensional and de-humanized human being to the *Faure Report's* fear of the 'fundamental risk of de-humanisation' (Faure 1972, xxi) and the enslavement of human beings by machines and technocracy, these shifts may result in the end of the emancipatory idea of lifelong learning (Edwards 2010). More than 80 years after the end of the 2<sup>nd</sup> World War, and despite the ongoing presence of wars and other crises in our world, our response seems to be resorting to the realm of dreams or to the saving grace of an all-pervasive technological society, which represent a very different vision of the human being put forth by the *Faure Report*, and possibly misrepresents the project of education altogether as 'education, unlike indoctrination and manipulation, is interested in the freedom and agency of those who take part in it' (Biesta 2021). Biesta argues that humanism should not be understood as an agenda that comes from outside of education, but 'can actually be found on the inside of education itself' (tbc). The post-humanist and anti-democratic shifts discussed above have potentially vast implications for education and bear the risk of classifying humans in 'superior and inferior groups' (Faure 1972, xxi).

## Concluding remarks

In this article, I discussed contemporary trends in the visions of international organisations that I characterised as 'post-humanist' to capture the differences to the earlier generation of humanism. I related these trends to two visions of 'solutions-comparative-education' that have influenced the 'educated identity' of the field of academic comparative education: the humanistic-democratic perspective represented by UNESCO, and the 'economics of education' movement, which was dominant in the OECD. The latter elevated supposedly scientifically obtained data to ultimate truths, according significant power to expert knowledge, increasingly undermining democratic processes and unfolding an anti-emancipatory effect. While the 1960s and 1970s lifelong education movement was inspired by an idea of education as a means of empowering human beings to become

active citizens in democratic societies, contemporary discourses have a tendency to depoliticize and decontextualise educational visions, no longer emphasising agency and political action.

Although the two post-humanist strands addressed in this paper – which I referred to as the ‘sustainable futures’ and the ‘techno-solutionist’ – have different ontological underpinnings, I would argue that both represent a challenge to the Western liberal idea of democracy, which was based on a strong and empowered citizen, endowed with human dignity, human potential and rights. Such categories have become suspicious, similar to the postmodern suspicion of the idea that human beings have an ‘essence’, which is being considered outdated and no longer relevant – Martha Nussbaum (1992) has written about ‘the collapse of essentialism about the human being’ (209). In the case of the ‘techno-solutionist’ strand, the dismissal of the human condition (which was the key theme of UNESCO’s *Faure Report*) may lead to the assumption that humans do not have intrinsic qualities and can be programmed and updated like machines. In the case of the ‘sustainable futures’ strand, there is a risk that utopianism may divert attention away from political action and that human rights may be subordinated to supposedly higher collective ideals, such as sustainability and safety. Ultimately, however, I would argue that it is the responsibility of ‘academic comparative education’ to critically distance itself from what appears to be just another set of promissory visions and master narratives, akin to the previous modernist idea of progress that postmodernists are so critical of. Just as many of the educational planners’ promises of eradication of poverty, rising equality and upward mobility have failed to materialise, it is hard to see how these new educational panaceas will yield better results.

Missing in both of these strands is a structural analysis of power. Rather than continuously designing new and promising futures for education, comparative education scholars would be well advised to be more critical of these visions, subject them to a historical and structural analysis, and reject the homogenisation that follows from universal ideas as every form of idealism may well become a new form of imperialism (Carnoy 2019, 35). There is a risk that behind the façade of utopian discourses of the ‘common good’, well-being (Kim 2022) and the promise of ever-greater skills, an all-pervasive technological society is taking hold that represents a power that will be hard to resist as it is invisible, unaccountable and not committed to democratic principles or an enlightened citizenry. As argued by Srnicek (2013), ‘the politics of representational technologies are increasingly significant, ubiquitous, and invisible ... The specifically political question of by whom and for whom these modes of perception are being created is increasingly cloaked in technical jargon’ (256). It is improbable that this technological society will advance the fulfilment of the hopes of greater equality, social justice and education for all that have been characteristic of comparative educationists.

To equip ourselves with tools for such a structural analysis, we may be well advised to return to the humanist and democratic traditions of the field and to some of the concepts that used to be part of its political consciousness but have since been driven out of it. For example, the literature of the lifelong education movement interpreted the resistance to lifelong education ‘in the context of a class war’ (Rubenson 2006, 66) – the social category of ‘class’ was part of the social sensitivity up until the 1990s, but has since disappeared from the vocabulary. The class conflict implicit in Andreas Schleicher’s remarks of the risks of humans becoming ‘second class robots’ seems to require some of these concepts

that we have too easily given up. Other concepts that may be worthwhile reviving are social reproduction and redistribution that were so central to what Carnoy (2019, 96) referred to as the mid-1970s ‘golden age’ of comparative education. Maybe the reason democracy is disappearing from the discourse in favour of de-contextualised dreams or techno-solutionist utopias is ultimately because the ‘superior groups’ have prevailed over the ‘inferior groups’, as Edgar Faure warned us in his foreword to the *Faure Report*. As an academic field with a long commitment to social justice, we should not give up so easily on our democratic and humanistic traditions and continue to scrutinise universalist fallacies and techno-solutionist fantasies and the anti-democratic and dehumanising tendencies they represent.

## Notes

1. It is important to note that in the 1970s also the OECD, in particular its Centre for Educational Research and Innovation (CERI), has engaged with ‘recurrent education’, an expression of the lifelong education movement.
2. Chapter 3, section ‘artificial intelligence’.

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