

New Education for the 21st Century?

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The New Education Movement—a forerunner of the World Education Fellowship (WEF)—emerged as a major international movement in the aftermath to the First World War as a response to the universal cry ‘How can we prevent this happening again?’ The time seems right for us to revisit the notion of New Education and our role in its promotion in the context of the 21st century.

From New Education’s first gathering in Calais, France, in 1921, educators from many countries shared the belief that schools had a major part to play in building a society where all peoples had the will, ability and confidence to live and work together in peace and harmony. Progressive educators from all continents met at successive conferences in different countries to share ideas and make plans; a range of journals and magazines in different languages was spawned for dissemination to teachers, academics and leading public figures. The New Education Movement was born.

Yet despite its Herculean efforts, New Education failed to prevent the Second World War and the many international spats that have continued thereafter. Pessimists are even talking about a Third World War in the near future. So what went wrong? Was the thesis itself – that progressive education could help build peace – simply wrong? Was it that we did not try hard enough? Or was it that we just needed more time and support?

It wasn’t for lack of interest or effort. At its height, over 30,000 people were involved in the New Education, including many leading progressives such as Dewey and Piaget. Pre-existing organisations affiliated to what became known as the New Education Fellowship. Autonomous sections were established in different countries and states, co-ordinated by Beatrice Ensor from a General Headquarters office in London. Bodies such as the Theosophical Society got involved. New Education made its first major impact in Australia in 1937 when schools closed to allow teachers to travel to hear the New Education message from visiting international experts. ‘New Education’ model schools were created in many parts of the world.

As a result, progressive education ideas and principles began to creep into mainstream education. In the UK, for instance, the Plowden Report on teaching and the creation of comprehensive secondary schools to replace separation at the age of 11 based on pupils’ examination results totally transformed the nature of schooling in the second half of the 20th Century. New Education’s fingerprints can be found on both of these initiatives. Similar stories of vision and inspirational leadership can be told elsewhere. The Arts and inter-disciplinary studies began to flourish. The New Education Movement was involved in the setting up of the United Nations and UNESCO, and celebrated UN’s 50th birthday with a conference in London in 1995.

Despite its successes, membership and participation in the New Education Movement (renamed in the sixties and seventies as The World Education Fellowship (WEF)) have steadily declined. Previously active Sections have disappeared; in others only a few individual active members survive. With the exception of some recent spectacular international conferences boosted by local participation in India and South Africa, and the emergence of the WEF Youth Section, the average age of regular participants is increasing and many have retired from active service. Journal circulation has declined accordingly, with this current edition of *New Horizons in Education* being the last in its present format.

A number of extraneous factors have contributed to the decline in WEF activity. Teachers have a plethora of professional and academic communities to which they can belong and have heavier burdens of administration and staff development; there are alternative sources of information and advice; governments have made significant changes to school provision and professional support; teacher training has embraced much of the New Education philosophy of the 20th century. We might also consider as a possible explanation for decline the name ‘World Education Fellowship’ itself. ‘Fellowship’ was adopted in the early days because it implied comradeship in the struggle, mutual support and professional respect (e.g. Fellow of the Royal Society). Today, for some, Fellowship has religious or gender connotations. For me, the main problem is that ‘World Education’ does not give notice of what kind of world education is being sought; desirable though global education is in itself. Why should anyone be attracted into active membership? For me the answer is clear. There is a growing need to re-focus on the notion of New Education in the very different context of the 21st Century, and that need is worldwide.

Eighty-five years on from its birth, the world in which WEF operates is significantly different. New technology is all-pervasive, bringing rapid changes to most aspects of our lives. Exchange of information and ideas has never been easier or quicker. Travel is rapid, cheap and global (it is sobering to remember that the founders of our movement attended international conferences in their 1,000s in the days before jet aircraft). The world of work has become (and in some regions of the world, is beginning to move towards) one of perpetual change where the ability to manage one’s own continuing development is as important as the skills required for one’s first job. Nor have social support structures been immune to rapid change.

Children anywhere on the planet can gain instant access, via the Internet, to the libraries and galleries of the world within a second of keying instructions into Google. Educational opportunity can be provided for the most remote and disadvantaged groups via mobile satellite dishes, computers donated by more fortunate states and remote expert teaching at costs much lower than the building of the most basic school with a library. Teachers, as everyone else, can work virtually with colleagues worldwide from their own classroom and home. Children and adults in India, Australia, Japan, Korea, South Africa, the Americas and Europe are able to forge working links around common projects, sharing cultural perspectives and experiences with people they would not previously have known existed. The focus of education is no longer exclusively on schools but is increasing lifelong.

The above changes are bringing other major challenges for education. Cheap transport is enabling migration of large numbers seeking work and a better living elsewhere, a move exacerbated by the increasing gap between the rich and the desperately poor. Mass migration is itself putting strains on multiculturalism with a growing tendency towards the creation of ghetto mentalities leading to possible mutual misunderstandings. The persistence of mass poverty in large areas of the globe is a blight on all our consciences. *In extremis*, religious fervour is being used to demonise others of different faith or culture. Surely, New Education for the 21st Century should have something to offer in these contexts.

In many ‘first world countries’, governments are imposing targets and league tables based on standardised measurable outcomes, thereby squeezing diversity of approach. Basic skills for employment are regarded as paramount—skills for living, community, creativity, the arts and continuing development have to fight for status in the basic curriculum. Yet the most useful general skill of the 21st Century, intelligent and creative use of the Internet, has not yet joined, in the minds of some politicians, reading, writing and arithmetic as basic to a productive life and, in the UK, is on the verge of being banned for use in assessable work.

It is time for WEF to address its potential role in the above scenario and how it is to achieve it. Is it to become a cosy club exchanging wise but well-worn beliefs about education with a decreasing number of fellow believers or is it capable of building alliances with other sympathetic groups to marshal intelligent and telling interventions that have a chance to make even a small difference? The 1921 message still applies but it needs updating and being forcefully delivered, ideally within the UNESCO umbrella but not exclusively so.

Is there enough support in the present membership to imagine a “NEW21” campaign--New Education Worldwide for the 21st Century—and has it the commitment and ability to bring it about? We have no need to change our name (that will take an age of distraction). We could simply announce NEW21 as a major WEF project.

I have set out the above not so much as a formal proposal but as a prompt for serious debate about our future. We need to spend the next year or so looking at the opportunities available to us and building the strength and expertise to exploit them. I very much hope that whatever medium follows this final edition of *New Horizons in Education*—whether in paper or on line—its readers will continue to play a leading role in that process.

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